The Complications at Collaroi

Rose Boldrewood

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BY

ROSE BOLDREWOOD

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DEDICATED

TO

MY DEAR FATHER

ROLPH BOLDREWOOD

PREFACE

WITH reference to the writer of "Complications at Collaroi," I may state that my daughter Rose has had exceptional opportunities of making herself acquainted with every aspect of Australian country life. She was born on my old station, and, with the other members of her family, lived in the country till early womanhood, so that every kind of what may be termed "Bush" life was familiar to her.

The experiences of country home life, of sport, and travel, were learnt at first-hand—I may say lived—after a fashion impossible to depict, without actual experience, or without the companionship of the actors in the various appearing melodrama of Bush life.

The travelling chiefly on horseback or in the light but serviceable buggy of the period; the riding horses selected for pace and action—each one the favourite of a youth or a maiden, and, as such, fed and cherished. All and each of

these accompaniments to the periodical pilgrimages or wayfarings, rendered necessary by the wide spaces and distances of the Bushland, demand accurate and faithful description, or the merit of the picture is lost.

The characters in this book are taken from actual life, and, whether in India or Australia, may be relied on as being truthful presentments of the personages they claim to portray, whether gentlefolk or otherwise, shepherds or stockmen, boundary riders or overseers—all or any of the miscellaneous crowd needed for one reason or another on a large station in Riverina or Queensland.

The writer paid a visit to India some little time ago, remaining for nearly a year, so that the land of punkahs is not unfamiliar to her. She may be trusted in descriptions of civil and military life in the East.

From childhood she has shown unmistakable signs of literary talent in the description of the life of the Australian squire, as the large-sized squatter, owner of a hundred thousand sheep and ten thousand head of cattle, may without exaggeration be termed.

So that the Bush life from her pen may be accepted, with its free and generous style of living, and the order " to bring more carriages,"

so to speak, as only in strict accordance with fact and reality.

In other respects the wealthy squatter more nearly resembles the large-acred squire of the English county. He is the acknowledged and privileged entertainer of the travelling tourist, perhaps a man of mark, even bearing an English title. The traveller has but to present his visiting card to be received courteously, shown to a comfortably furnished bedroom, invited to dinner, and to remain as a guest as long as it suits his convenience.

His host, who is a magistrate, and probably the chairman of the bench, explains the season and circumstances of the neighbourhood, trusts he will make a longer stay, etc.

There is hardly any visible departure from the manner and custom of his entertainment in an English country house. The guest reflects, as he rides away—provided perhaps with a guide, or at any rate with a *carte du pays*, for the next stage—" How different from the Bush habitude which I was led to expect ! "

ROLPH BOLDREWOOD.

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THE COMPLICATIONS AT COLLAROI

CHAPTER I

"We've just got ten minutes," Dick Upton said, looking tenderly into the eyes of the girl beside him. They were standing on the Redfern station by the sleeping carriage on the southern express.

"I wish you were coming too, darling—it would seem the most natural thing in the world if you were. I'd give anything if this long waiting was over and I could take you home to Collaroi."

"I'd give anything, too."

"I'd give everything, Mary, yes, *everything*, if it were possible. I hate leaving you, sweetheart. How ripping it will be when we are always together!

"By Jove, the time's nearly up, and I haven't

said half the things I wanted to. I forget everything else when I'm with you."

"Never mind, you can put them all in your letter from Jeruga," said his fiancée bravely, though the tears were very near her blue eyes. "When shall we see each other again?"

"I'll try and run up for a week after shearing, at the end of October. Oh, hang it, here's the guard.

"Good-bye, darling," leaning out for a last look at the girl he loved. "I'll write from Jeruga; you write too, then we'll both hear on the same day."

The train moved relentlessly out of the station: in another moment he was carried out of sight. Mary waved her hand until the last moment. Then she turned slowly to make her way to the pretty home at Darling Point, with its terraced garden stretching down to the beach, and its exquisite view of the blue waters of Sydney Harbour.

Poor little girl! She was only twenty-one, and her heart sank at the thought of the long months before she could see Dick again.

"This is Wednesday—I ought to hear from him on Friday morning."

The tram stopped; she got out and walked along Darling Point Road till she reached two

iron gates bearing the legend "Mount Augusta." Passing up the avenue, she turned by a clump of camellia trees carpeting the ground with their rosy blossoms, and skirting the lawns, bright with flaming pointsettias and hybiscus, reached the verandah and disappeared under the trailing bougainvillea.

A fair-haired child rushed out crying, "Aunty Marewee—play moothic."

Mary kissed the little face, "Very well, ducky! Where's your mummy?"

"Mummy gone to town—left baby *all* er-lone."

"Did she? Never mind, my bird!"

A moment later she reached the drawing-room, followed by Lou-Lou. It took her some time to find the music, and as she began "Whistling Rufus," the door opened, and a tall, graceful woman came in.

"Well, child, did you see Dick off?"

"Yes. I stayed till the train went. We shan't see him again till October."

"Poor little girl! Never mind, dearie! We will get father to let Dick manage one of his stations in Queensland. I don't approve of long engagements."

"Neither do I!" And a little figure entered, looking ridiculously young to be the mother of Lou-Lou. "That's why I married Roger after

being engaged two months—and it's been so successful that I advise every one to follow suit!"

"Oh, don't, Bee!"

"I mean it!" Mrs. Merivale laughed. "*I* never could have been constant to any man for two years! But then, I'm intensely practical—you're so romantic! Lou-Lou, here's the baby do-do! Go on playing, Molly. Hold up your frock, baby—like this!"

She held up her skirts, disclosing a neat pair of black silk ankles, and danced a two-step. The child watched her, fascinated, as she circled slowly round, on the tips of her toes, trying to imitate her mother.

CHAPTER II

Mary Hammond was the daughter of a wealthy squatter, who, after years of station life, elected to settle in Sydney, intending to take winter trips to inspect his various properties in Queensland.

His wife and daughters installed themselves in the big house at Darling Point. And Mrs. Hammond found "Mount Augusta," with its delightful garden, everything she wished for as a town residence.

But Mary soon tired of the mill-round of city life. She longed for the free country life. Often she wished herself back in the fresh atmosphere of the big station. She missed the long rides with her father and brother through the bush. She missed all the hundred and one interests to be found on a station, especially when one has lived there half one's life. It was true she and her mother had their horses in town, but though they rode and drove daily, still, "it was so hard to get away from houses."

Bee, the elder sister, had married immediately, and gone to live in the western district of Victoria, from which she had just returned, her husband having been suddenly called to England.

It was during a visit to Mrs. Merivale that Mary met Dick Upton, who was spending a holiday at the next station, and recovering from a fall out hunting.

He had hurt his leg, and the doctor had placed the injured limb in plaster of Paris, advising him to keep it up for a time. Then Mrs. Merivale and Mary came to stay for a fortnight. Mary was young and exceptionally pretty, and Dick found her a delightful companion. He had a craving for sympathy, and being offered it—asked for more !

The visit was extended to three weeks, and he suddenly discovered that he was in love.

Mrs. Merivale pitied the damaged warrior, and unsuspectingly asked him over to Warrandyte.

It will be easily understood that things rapidly approached a climax, culminating one moonlight evening, when Bee returned to the verandah, to be greeted with the news that " they were engaged ! "

" You naughty girl," she said, following Mary to her room. " What have you to say for yourself ? And to think I never suspected it for a

moment! Heaven knows what the parents will say?"

"Don't scold me. Dick and I are *so* happy, and we've only got one more day—he goes back to Collaroi on Thursday. You'll put in a good word for me with father? Think how I effaced myself when you were engaged to Roger!"

"I admit that—but tell me what you intend to live on?"

"We shall have to wait a year or two. Dick hopes to get the management of a larger station."

"I see—that means a long engagement!"

"Don't be a wet blanket! He has expectations from a wealthy uncle in England."

"Don't build on *that*! Wealthy uncles often live till they are ninety, when it transpires that they have left their property to charities."

"I don't care if he does. You'll see it will come all right in the end. Listen! Was that Lou-Lou?"

A week later Mary returned home. Mr. Hammond was sternly disapproving at first, and spoke of the "folly of long engagements." However, by degrees his daughter persuaded him to take a more cheerful view.

"You see, father, I'm only twenty-one, and Dick is twenty-eight, so we can wait till he gets a better appointment."

"Has he any hope of that, or is this merely conjecture?"

"Not altogether; an old friend offered Dick the management of a station near Roma, two years ago, but, unfortunately, he had just promised to go to Collaroi. However, Mr. Rankin is to let him know directly he has another vacancy."

"I see. Well, I shall reserve my opinion till I've seen Upton. We'll see—we'll see!"

Two months later Dick ran up to Sydney, ostensibly to attend the July sheep sales, and submitted himself for inspection by the family. He felt a certain degree of nervousness at meeting his father-in-law prospective for the first time—but, as he confided to Mary—

"I managed to hide it, and put on a bold front. Your father was rather stern at first, but relented gradually. He wouldn't hear of our being married till I had a better salary, but said that if we really cared for each other, and were content to wait till then, he would not stand in our way. He hinted that, later on, he might give me the management of one of his Queensland stations."

Mary smiled. "I knew father would come round in the end," picking a little white thread off the shoulder of Dick's coat. "He isn't really hard, you know, but believes in putting people on

probation till he is *quite* sure of them—but that's a sound principle ! "

" I suppose it is," Dick admitted. " Thank goodness we are absolutely certain of each other ! I'd wait for you till the crack of doom ! "

" What a battered old couple we should be by that time," she laughed.

" I wouldn't care if you were *seventy* ! I could *never* love another woman as I love you, darling. Come into the garden, it's just lovely outside. Shall I bring the cigarettes ? "

" Yes, do," leading the way through the French window. They strolled across the green lawns, and on down the terraced slopes of the enchanting garden. They halted by the magnolia tree, to gaze at the blue waters of the bay, with its flight of white-winged yachts, the little fort, the islands, and the big iron-grey warships, lying grim and silent at their moorings.

" What a picture it is ! " Dick said. " Won't it be jolly when we are married, and can walk about our own place ? It isn't only that we're so fond of each other, darling, but we'd be such chums ! "

" Of course we would. I'd take the keenest interest in all your work—the polo ponies, the sheep, your pet collie, everything on the place, in fact."

"Dear old girl! I know you would. And when I come home cold and tired, in the winter, after a long day on the run, it will be so sweet to know that you are there waiting for me, and hiding behind the door, to jump out suddenly when I come in—while I pretend to be der-*readfully* surprised."

"We would be comrades, Dick, wouldn't we, in the truest sense of the word?"

"We would indeed, darling, and a comrade is what a man wants more than anything in the woman he loves—an intuitive, sympathetic companion, who would enter into all his joys and sorrows, hopes and ambitions, live up to his ideals, and encourage him to give out the best and noblest of himself. You would be all that, Mary, and if bad times came——"

Mary looked up; her blue eyes met his. "And if bad times came," she said impulsively, "I would sit on the arm of your chair, and lay my cheek against yours, and say, 'Never mind, dear old boy, we will weather the storm somehow. I'm not afraid of facing anything if you are beside me—and, after all, as long as we have each other nothing else *really* matters.'"

Dick took her in his arms. "Doesn't it, darling?

Is that how you feel about it? It only shows the complete harmony between us, for you have echoed all my sentiments on the subject. I could meet any trouble calmly, and bear any trial as long as it did not mean separation."

CHAPTER III

When Dick got out of the train at Collaroi siding, he collected the mail-bag—his luggage was carried out—and seating himself in the buggy, took the reins. The horses went off simultaneously, and he was soon well on the way to the homestead.

"After all," he thought, "there's no place like the country! If Mary were here, I shouldn't have a thing left to wish for."

As he drove in through the big white gates of Collaroi, a string of kangaroo dogs came tearing out, followed by his favourite collie, who exhibited every sign of joy.

"Well, Lassie," he said, stooping to pat her, "glad to see me?"

She wagged her tail, licked his hand, then rubbed herself against his legs, gazing into his face with brown, faithful eyes.

He walked into the dining-room, where the housekeeper was arranging the tea-tray. A young man came in from the back verandah.

"Glad to see you back. So you tore yourself away from the metropolis, after all!"

"Why, it's Wharton!" exclaimed Dick. "How are you, old chap? What luck to find you here. I was looking forward to a lonely evening!"

"How did you leave Miss Hammond?"

"She's looking blooming. I'm going to run up to Sydney after shearing. I'm afraid there's no hope of our getting married before Christmas; but I hope for better luck next year. What about yourself; been taking Miss Amy out kangaroo-hunting?"

"Rather—she *can* ride. I often think that if ever I took it into my head to settle down, that's the sort of girl I'd choose. She's such a good pal—pretty, too—don't you think so?"

"I've always admired her, but she's rather stand-off with me."

"That's only her way. They've got a new governess for the younger girls—rather handsome woman, and sings well. I've been practising up my songs, and she plays my accompaniments. Miss Hunter says some of my middle notes are excellent."

"You don't say so, old man!"

"It's a fact! Wait till you hear me sing 'I Fear no Foe.'"

"Why, man, that's as old as the hills."

"Never mind, it's a fine song."

. . . . . .

When Dick drove out next morning, after seeing Charley depart—under a clear blue sky, flecked with feathery clouds—it seemed to him as if all nature smiled with welcome. The magpies warbled gaily among the topmost boughs of the blue-gum trees. He felt the fresh morning air blowing on his face, as the horses trotted down the bush track. The grass was sprinkled with daisies and yellow dandelions, and, farther on, great branches of white-berried mistletoe hung from the trees, while the purple blossoms of the kennedya twined themselves round fallen logs and aged stumps.

It was good to be alive on such a day in autumn, that delightful quarter of the year—preferred by some people before even spring itself, whose praises have been sung in every language under heaven.

The exhilarating feeling experienced by all lovers of country life stole gradually over him. He felt his spirits rising to their usual buoyancy.

There would be a letter from Mary this afternoon. He would drive round by the siding and get the mail-bag, after inspecting the fencing at the fourteen-mile paddock.

. . . . . .

"Could you give us a job, boss?" said a voice, as Dick pulled up to give the horses a drink at the creek. Then he turned and descried a swagman sitting on a log, boiling a much-blackened "billy" at a small fire of dead sticks. His swag, consisting of the inevitable "bluey" (blue blanket), lay beside him. He was an active-looking person, with a not unpleasing face—his dusty clothes and the damaged state of his boots testified to a long and weary tramp. A dog crouching on the grass at his feet barked loudly at the new-comers, while his master came over to the buggy.

Dick looked at the man.

"Where do you come from?" he asked.

"From Walgett, boss. It's a terrible long tramp. I'm willin' to do any sort of a job—fencing, burning-off, shepherding, anything—if you'll only give us a trial?"

"H—m! Well, there's some burning-off to be done. Keep on that track for about a mile, then you'll see the turn-off to the right"—pointing with his whip across the plain—"that takes you straight to the homestead. Go to the storekeeper, say Mr. Upton sent you—he'll show you the men's hut. I'll see you in the morning." The traveller thanked him, and departed.

Reaching the siding, Dick tied the reins to

the splashboard and went to get the mail-bag. Reappearing, he unlocked it, and eagerly extracted the letter. Then he went back to deliver a forgotten message to the station-master. As he disappeared, a yellow mongrel of a dog rushed out of the gate-keeper's cottage, barking furiously; the horses pricked up their ears, hesitated for a moment, then bolted off across the plain.

Dick's language, when he arrived just too late to intercept them, was distinctly decorative.

"Hang it all," he concluded, "I'll have to walk the whole seven miles home!" He began reading Mary's letter as he walked slowly across the crab-holey plain.

"One thing is certain, the horses will make straight back to the stable. I hope they won't smash the buggy."

"What a dear she is!" Dick thought, as he folded up the letter, and walked in long, swinging strides on the homeward track.

"Hulloa! what's this?" and, looking up, beheld, to his surprise, the ex-runaways trotting calmly towards him under the guidance of the swagman. The wayfarer was seated aloft in the buggy, handling the reins with dexterity.

"Here you are, boss!" bringing the horses up in front of the astonished manager. "It's

a good job I was near at hand, and just 'appened to nip out and ketch 'em. Sure's death, they'd ha' smashed the buggy to matchwood afore they got back."

"It's more than probable, my man. And now you'd better stay where you are. I'll give you a lift on to Collaroi."

Joe Blundell was duly put on the strength of the "burning-off" contingent next day. He was profoundly grateful, and acquitted himself so well that a long job of fencing supervened. Later on, he rose to be one of the permanent "hands."

So the golden autumn months rolled by, winter came creeping on. The polo season began—always an absorbing joy to Dick, who was an ardent exponent of the game. The time was fast approaching when the annual match against the Town and Station teams was to take place, and the preliminary practice had begun.

Dick often went over to Weanerbah; he liked spending his Sundays at the hospitable country home, where you were always welcome at any hour of the day.

Mrs. Elliott and her husband were old-fashioned people, and their hospitality was proverbial. He liked Miss Amy, with her shy ways and soft eyes, and he thought he detected signs of

mutual interest between her and Charley Wharton. The latter was the eldest son of the owner of Weanerbah, who had settled in England. A year ago he had elected to send his son out to learn colonial experience from his manager, Mr. Elliott. Charley was a fine manly fellow, and he and Dick had made friends immediately. Bob Elliott was a good sort, and all three were great chums.

Dick, however, was not pleased with his last visit. "I'm not satisfied at the way things are going at Weanerbah," he wrote to Mary. "Wharton's a susceptible fellow, and that new governess is obviously setting her cap at him. Before she came I'm sure he liked Miss Elliott, and apparently she reciprocated, and now Miss Hunter always comes between them. I couldn't help noticing it. She flatters him up about his singing, insists on playing his accompaniments—and all the time old Charley can hardly keep in tune. She sings well, herself, and is a tremendous talker, while Miss Amy is rather quiet. I assure you, last Sunday Miss Hunter monopolised the entire conversation. I only hope she won't catch Wharton; he's much too good for her."

CHAPTER IV

"Nice day, baby go walkee-walkee!" remarked Lou-Lou, standing at the morning-room window, with her little face glued to the glass; "not 'aining *any* more," looking round at Mary, who sat doing some sewing.

"So you shall, my bird! Do you know what?"

"Know what?" echoed Lou-Lou.

"Little Cousin Billy is coming to go with you to the Zoo, to see the lions and tigers, and feed the monkeys with biscuits!"

"Baby going to the Zoo with likka 'Tousin Billy.'"

Just then Jane entered, bearing a silver salver, on which reposed a letter, addressed to Miss Hammond. All other topics were forgotten. Mary didn't stop to cut it with a pair of scissors, but tore it open hurriedly. No one would have imagined, as she went through the big square sheets, then read it a second time, that it was the third epistle of the kind she had received during the week.

Nurse removed Lou-Lou, and Mary went on with her letter.

" I'm tremendously busy with shearing, which began yesterday," Dick wrote. " Halkett, my chief, is coming up next week, bringing his sister, Mrs. Vane. She is a widow, lately returned from India with a friend, and they will stay a couple of months. Rather a nuisance having them here just now. There's a big union camp near Rocky Point—about two hundred—and I'm hanged if the sneaking wretches didn't inveigle away three parts of our men, till Warnock and I were left with a board of *seven* ! However, we wired to Sydney for forty-five non-unionists. Charley and I met them at the siding, with a couple of troopers, and escorted them here safely, without firing a shot. Charley was rather disappointed that we didn't have a skirmish ; but we're not out of the wood yet—they may play up later. However, Warnock is over the shed this year, and they'll find him pretty tough. Halkett's a ripping good chap, and I've always hit it off with him ; but what am I to do with his widowed sister ? She is probably middle-aged and mournful, while her friend is dull, and I've got too much to do to drive them about."

" Poor old boy ! " she thought. " He doesn't

seem keen about the visitors. But perhaps the widow is a nice motherly soul—even the dull friend may improve."

. . . . . .

"Where are you, Mary?" called Mrs. Merivale, as she walked in, followed by a young man.

"Here's Peter," she announced. "I found him walking aimlessly in George Street, so I brought him back to tea, thinking he might amuse us."

"Well, I like that '*might*,' indeed," objected the said "Peter," *alias* Mr. John Marcus Dalrymple, of H.M.S. *Euroclydon*. "How do you do, Miss Mary. I appeal to you. Don't I always amuse you? Mrs. Merivale is very hard on me."

"Never mind," said Mary. "She's a trifle fractious this morning—the English mail is late. What are you doing here, when the *Euroclydon* has gone cruising among the islands?"

"Left behind on sick leave."

"What is the matter with you? Would it be rude to say your looks belie you?"

"It would. I've been suffering from various ailments. I'm only out of hospital this morning. Can I come and play here sometimes?"

"Of course! You can ride with Bee and me. I often go out before breakfast."

"There's nothing I should enjoy more. I rode regularly before breakfast in Bombay. There was a chap there who lent me horses. He was no good at riding himself, but his horses were A1. By the way, how's 'Fly-by-Night'? Is it still on—or have you broken it off?"

"What nonsense! And don't call Mr. Upton 'Fly-by-Night.' I won't have it. Here comes tea, so get up and help me!"

. . . . . .

"Where's mummy?" and Lou-Lou peeped in.

"Here, darling!"

"No pitty ladies?"

"No; but who's this?"

She ran to Peter, wreathed in smiles.

"Well, my bird," said her mother, "what did the tiger say to you?"

"He say, 'Hulloa, baby!'" glibly. "And I 'oared with laugh. I said, 'Come on, come on,' and he wouldn't come. Naughty old tiger!"

"Did you, Lover?"

"Likka Tousin Billy was fi-tened of the big lion. Baby gave him bisticks, but Billy wouldn't—he *kied*!"

"Well done, my brave girl!" said Peter. "I wonder if you know what this is?"

"It'th chocky! Baby liketh chocky!"

CHAPTER V

"THE train's late!" thought Dick Upton discontentedly, as he stood by the waggonette, waiting for the visitors.

His beloved buggy had been discarded in favour of this lumbering vehicle—while a cart stood ready for the luggage.

Now the train appeared in sight, and shortly came alongside the platform. The luggage was finally unearthed, then Mr. Halkett appeared, in company with two ladies, followed by a maid.

"How are you, Upton? Let me introduce you to my sister. Dolly, this is Mr. Upton—Miss Wingham, Mr. Upton."

"How do you do! I'm afraid we've kept you waiting."

Dick was speechless. Surely this dark-haired slip of a girl wasn't Mrs. Vane? Why, she couldn't be more than five- or six-and-twenty. As for her "dull friend," the graceful girl with the classic profile didn't come under that heading.

"Not at all," he said. "I—er—we've only

just got here. I hope you've had a comfortable journey."

"Far from it," she smiled. "How far is it to Collaroi, Frank?"

"Only seven miles," helping her into the waggonette; and getting up beside Upton, they were soon deep in station matters.

"Isn't it funny, Isabel, that I've never seen Collaroi?"

"What, not even when you were a school-girl?"

"No. You see, I met Mr. Vane on my way back from England, having been to school there. We became engaged on the voyage, and were married in Melbourne soon after I landed, as he had to return to his tea estates in Assam."

"You didn't come out here when your husband died?"

"No; Frank wanted me to, but I preferred staying in Belgaum, with Mildred. Fortunately, I met you last cold weather, and now I intend to keep you."

"Isn't it strange," Miss Wingham said. "I met you at Mrs. Lucas' at-home, for the first time, and I am in Australia to-day."

"I hope we shall find some amusement at the station," said Mrs. Vane; "but I shouldn't wonder if we find ourselves on a P. & O. boat

bound for India, before long. I shan't make any plans, or if I do, they're open to alteration."

"There I agree with you. I hate people who say to me, 'Oh, *I thought* you said you were going on such and such a day!' I always tell them calmly that it is quite simple—I've changed my mind!"

"What's the use of being a woman if you can't? It's our especial prerogative . . ." She stopped. "Why, I believe we've reached our destination."

"What a pretty place! Look at the river! I see a boat down there, under the willows—a garden too, lots of orange trees, and grape vines."

"Welcome to Collaroi," said Halkett. "Come along in. Tea will be ready!"

. . . . . .

"I feel much better now," Mrs. Vane declared, leaning back in her chair beside the tea-table.

She had taken off her hat, and looked even more girlish; her dark grey eyes danced with mischief.

"Won't you have another cup, Mrs. Vane?" Dick asked.

"Yes, I will. You make excellent tea, Isabel. Being the chaperon of the party, *I* ought to be presiding at the teapot, but I don't feel able."

"Miss Wingham adorns the position," said Dick; then, carrying the fresh cup to Mrs. Vane, he offered her a plate of scones. As she took one, Halkett knocked his elbow, and the tea was spilt on Dolly's skirt.

"How stupid of me," stooping down to dry it with his handkerchief.

"It doesn't matter in the least. Ward will see to it."

"I expect you would like to see your rooms, Dolly?" said Halkett. "Elizabeth's been making great preparations."

CHAPTER VI

COLLAROI, MUNDEROONA,
September 12.

"MY DEAREST CHILD,—The 'house-party' has arrived. You'll be surprised to hear that Mrs. Vane is quite a young girl—only a little older than yourself. Her husband died three years ago, and she has come out with Miss Wingham just to see her brother. Mrs. Vane isn't exactly pretty, but has a very taking manner. You will probably tell me not to flirt with her, but you needn't alarm yourself, darling, I've neither time nor inclination to do so.

"How I wish *you* were here!

"We could ride together, and drive together, and do anything you liked. And that's as near happiness as I expect to get, for some time, sweetheart.

"Charley came and helped me entertain them the evening they arrived, and they've been friends ever since. He's rather lonely just now; Bob is in Queensland. Miss Hunter got seedy, and the doctor ordered her home to Adelaide. She persuaded Miss Amy to go with her, for the trip.

"Miss Wingham rides splendidly. Charley took her out on the new black mare, and he says she is the best horsewoman he ever saw. Mrs. Vane doesn't care about riding—says she's nervous—but I think it's just indolence. She has evidently been spoilt in India. I shall try very hard to run up to see you when shearing is over. It seems years since I said good-bye to you.

"Good-bye, my darling. I would give anything to see you now, to tell you once again that I love you better than any other living being.—Always your own DICK."

To MRS. GEOFFREY EGERTON,
c/o COLONEL EGERTON,
Gloucester Regiment, Belgaum,
India. COLLAROI, *Sept.* 12.

"MY DEAREST MILDRED,—I am writing to let you know that Isabel and I are comfortably settled here. I was afraid it would be deadly, but things have improved the last few days.

"Of course I miss the Club, and the gymkhanas, and dances—the little 'bridge dinners,' and all the fun one has at Belgaum. But I was rather run down, and when I got to Bombay, the doctor said I wanted a thorough change. This place is 'restful.' I've been so long away, that life in the bush is a novelty. It reminds me of our childhood at Mullengudgerie. Do you remember how the blacks used to camp on the creek, and we watched them skinning possums,

and roasting them in front of their fires? Mr. Upton, the manager, is a nice soul—though I don't think he approves of me. However, I'm doing my best to convert him. Our next-door neighbour at Weanerbah is quite charming. He drives over fairly often. My music is appreciated here—they make me sing for hours. Isabel is an ideal accompanist, and both the men love to be asked to sing. Haven't you noticed that, though our male friends profess to admire our sympathetic sopranos, or soul-stirring contraltos, they infinitely prefer us to play, while *they* perform? Naturally, I miss Jack—I don't attempt to disguise the fact. I'm sorry we parted as we did—but he simply *wouldn't* listen to my explanations. So I just left him to cool down. He hasn't written yet. But I expect he will shortly. He was entirely in the wrong—though you took his part. However, I shall just forget him, *pro tem.* Write and tell me all the station *gup*—and if the Hamlyn girl is engaged? Don't forget this, as I am anxious to hear.

"Good-bye, dear; love to you and Geoff.—Your affectionate sister, DOROTHEA VANE."

MOUNT AUGUSTA,
DARLING POINT, *September* 16.

"MY DEAR OLD DICK,—Only a short letter to-day, because I have to go to tennis in a few minutes.

"I'm glad your 'house-party' turned out

better than you expected. The widow from India sounds quite amusing! You silly old boy! It never entered my head to tell you 'not to flirt with her.' You know how absolutely I trust you. I'm not afraid of Mrs. Vane, or any other woman, as far as you're concerned. My cold is gone, and I feel splendid, thank goodness! I enjoy the tennis immensely, it's such good exercise. I've been trying to get Bee to play, but she's says it's too fatiguing.

"We've seen a good deal of 'Peter' Dalrymple—you'll remember him—he's on the *Euroclydon*. We saw a good deal of him in Hobart, when he was always in our house. He's on sick leave now; so we take it in turns to ride with him, as he still looks rather white.

"Lou-Lou is as funny as ever. I don't know what I shall do when that child goes. Bee had a cable from Roger saying he is leaving England to-morrow—so we shan't have them much longer. Well, I must be off, dear old boy.—In ever such a hurry, always your own

"MARY."

"Bless her!" said Dick. He was reading the above in the little verandah room, known as "the office."

"There's no one like Mary! She has none of the ordinary feminine narrow-mindedness about other women. I'm not half worthy of her, but, as far as that goes, no man *is*."

"You're looking pensive, Mr. Upton," said a gay voice, as he emerged from the office. He looked up, to see Mrs. Vane reclining gracefully in a hammock on the verandah, exhibiting a liberal display of lace-frilled skirts and the daintiest of buckled shoes.

"Decidedly pensive," she continued. "I hope you've had no bad news?"

Dick blushed under her gaze; he still held Mary's letter, and was conscious that she saw the handwriting.

"What sharp eyes women have," he thought.

"No—er—nothing particular."

"I see," said Mrs. Dolly; and she did see. In that moment, with a woman's unerring intuition, she saw through him like a pane of glass, and grasped the situation.

"Of course, he's engaged to some girl. That's why he takes such an interest in the mail-bag, and departs to the office with his letters. But I'm not supposed to know this—it only makes things more exciting. I shan't do him any *real* damage; but it's not in human nature to exist without some form of amusement."

What she said was—"Bring your pipe, and come and talk to me. Isabel is writing letters, Frank is out on the run, so there is no one left but you," with the air of a spoilt child.

Dick looked at the girlish figure in the hammock, and hesitated; the mischievous grey eyes met his own, then dropped suddenly. He gave in—half unwillingly.

"I'm not much good at amusing people, but I'll get the pipe and try!"

He went away, returning with the brier-wood, and seated himself in a Colombo chair beside the hammock.

CHAPTER VII

"It's wonderful how the days go," remarked Isabel. "You told me it would be so quiet, but I don't find it so. I haven't done a stitch of sewing."

"Now, Isa, *don't* insinuate that station life is having a deteriorating effect on you!"

They had just come back from a visit to the wool-shed, escorted by Charley.

Dolly affected to take a deep interest in the "baa-lambs," and insisted on having the whole workings of the shed explained to her. "What fine men some of those shearers are, and how they must enjoy getting out of that hot, greasy place to have their 'Smoke-oh'!"

"You needn't pity them; shearers do themselves remarkably well on the whole, and are fed like fighting cocks."

"It reminds me strongly of Mullengudgerie," Dolly said. "The smell of the wool brings it all back to me. I remember how we loved being taken to the wool-shed when we were children.

There was a quandong tree half-way to the shed; I can see it now. We took the liveliest interest in the shearing, and were on the most friendly terms with the shearers' cook, who gave us cakes and 'brownie.' One of the men, nicknamed 'Campbelltown,' used to bring us toys from the township. The blacks' camp was another joy. There was a whole tribe 'sitting down' in their gunyahs on the banks of the creek. They used to give us presents of small spears and boomerangs. One old gin, named Nanny, who came to scrub the verandahs, gave me a quandong necklace and a gunny-bag for some old clothes. The two Kurrajongs my brother Val and I planted on each side of the gate must be tall trees by this time!"

"I'm glad the weather is getting warmer," said Isabel; "those poor sheep look so cold and bare when their nice thick fleeces have been taken, to roll up on that table before stuffing them into those big bales with 'Collaroi, 1st cloth' printed on them."

"They won't have time to feel cold," Charley assured her. "The summer will soon be here, and you'll be fancying yourselves back at Belgaum."

"Not quite," smiled Dolly. "I wish the Club was within reach, not to mention the polo

tournaments and gymkhanas. By the way, we get the English mail to-day, don't we?"

"We do. You'll get your letters in about two minutes; I see Billy bringing in the mail-bag. Hurrah! Here's Elizabeth with the tray!"

Isabel sat down behind the teapot.

Mrs. Vane opened the mail-bag with her brother's key, which hung on a nail. She glanced hastily through her budget of letters, among which was a large, greyish-blue envelope, with a regimental crest on the flap. Her face flushed as she saw it. Dropping the others in a heap, she opened it eagerly.

"You seem to have a large Indian correspondence!" Charley remarked, bringing her cup.

Dolly started as she looked up to meet his eyes, their mischievous expression telling her plainly that he understood.

"The little rogue! She's evidently left her best young man at Belgaum, although she is trying to make Dick flirt with her. I wonder what's keeping Dick? I'll just collect his letters."

"Mr. Upton has the lion's share of the post," said Isabel. "What a pretty hand!" glancing at the topmost envelope.

"That's Miss Hammond's writing—the girl he's engaged to," Charley said.

Dolly looked up. "Engaged! Is he, really? What is the fiancée like?"

"She is remarkably pretty, about twenty-one, with a fresh complexion, dark blue eyes, and brown hair."

"What a paragon! I should like to see her photograph."

"Ask Dick to show you one; he's got several. Miss Wingham, what about a ride? Kitty is spoiling for a gallop. Won't you come, Mrs. Vane?"

Dolly leant back and shook her head. "Not I. I really haven't the energy to get into a habit. Besides, I haven't read my letters. Isabel is always ready for a ride; I shall stay here, and—perhaps—go for a stroll later."

. . . . . .

Dolly was reading the greyish-blue letter for the third time, when the door opened to admit Dick. She crumpled it up and put it into her pocket. But Dick saw nothing. He collected his letters, and was departing, when Dolly intercepted him.

"Aren't you going to wait for your tea?"

"I'll be back in a few minutes," he replied.

"It will be cold then," she argued. "I'll tell Elizabeth to make a fresh brew."

"Please don't," he protested.

When he returned the teapot was replenished; there were fresh supplies of "brownie." Dolly sat behind the tray, busying herself among the cups and saucers, and the atmosphere of comfort appealed strongly to Dick after a tiring day.

"Very good of the little woman to take so much trouble," he thought. "There's something very attractive about her."

. . . . . .

"I must go to Melbourne to-morrow," Halkett announced. "I suppose you can get on without me, Dolly? Would you like to drive over and see Mrs. Elliott?"

"I'd rather stay here," Dolly objected. "Mrs. Elliott should call on me. You forget that I'm a 'married lady!'"

"I'll bring her over next week," suggested Wharton, who had come in. "It's no use going just now," he went on; "Miss Amy and Miss Hunter are away, and Bob isn't back yet."

"Have we any other neighbours, Frank?" asked his sister.

"Oh yes; three or four families within a reasonable radius. First, there are the Hastings of Garulan, on the other side of the river. Bertie, the eldest son, is the captain of our local polo team. The girls—Bessie and Nelly—are both

friends of mine; they live with their brothers and an aunt. They'll be calling on you directly. Then there are the Lovells of Mungelgumbie, sixteen miles away, and the Blakes of Moryanbone, beyond the railway siding. Lastly, the Blairs of Combogle, eighteen miles across the Back Plains, the kindest, most hospitable people in the world."

"Excellent," smiled Dolly. "Your visiting list is quite extensive. I'm glad, because I want to have a small entertainment before I depart, and those dear people will come in nicely."

"How enterprising of you!" Charley exclaimed. "May I help you?"

"What can you do?"

"I'm rather good with a magic lantern, and absolutely unrivalled as a Christy Minstrel."

"But you see my ideas soar higher than magic lanterns and Christy Minstrels."

"Much higher?"

"What do you think of a series of tableaux, with a dance to follow?"

"Ripping idea! We could have Desdemona and Othello; but Dick would have to be the Moor; I'm not dark enough."

"Delightful! We often got up tableaux at Belgaum."

"If you were in the cast, their success was assured."

"I was, and so was Isa. We did *The Peacemaker* once. Isabel did the injured heroine, while Captain Wyndham took the part of the hero——" She stopped; a far-away look came into her eyes.

"I'm very fond of *The Peacemaker*," Dick said. "You should let us see it."

"I'll think about it."

"Did Miss Wingham come on again?" queried Charley.

"Naturally. She made the hit of the evening as a statue! Some of the others were furious at not being given the part."

"Do you mean Galatea?"

"No; what *was* her name?"

"Hermione," suggested Dick.

"Oh yes, she was Hermione. I was her daughter Perdita. There was a description of the performance in the *Pioneer*, with remarks on Miss Wingham's statuesque appearance, Grecian profile, etc."

"Do stop, Dolly."

"The *Pioneer* spoke the truth," said Charley. "You'd make a ripping statue."

"So she did."

"Do you know, I've often wondered whom

you reminded me of," he continued. "It's the statue of Proserpine, which stands in the hall in my home in England. The resemblance is extraordinary."

"Don't be personal."

"Ladies and gentlemen, this meeting stands adjourned," said Halkett, rising.

Dick followed him, while the others repaired to the verandah. Mrs. Vane retreated to her hammock, Charley lit a cigarette and strolled up and down the path with Isabel.

Dolly lay swinging silently—her thoughts far away. A restless fit came over her; the other two had wandered a little farther off. She got out of the hammock, and walked down the moonlit garden till she reached the fence overlooking the river.

"How peaceful!" leaning her elbows on the top rail. "It's impossible to stay indoors on such a night," gazing on the enchanting scene beneath her. The moonlight flooded everything. The shining river and the trees above it were turned to silver. The plaintive notes of a distant curlew rang out through the clear air.

"If Jack were here," Dolly said to herself. "I believe—I wish——" She stopped; her eye fell on the boat nestling under the willows. "I think I'll go down and sit in it," she thought.

"I want to think. Perhaps I'd better get a wrap." She flew inside, returning with a cloak. As she stepped off the verandah a tall figure came round the corner of the house.

"Where are you going?" asked Dick.

"The moonlight is so alluring that I can't stay inside. I'm going down to sit in the boat; Mr. Wharton and Isabel are strolling about the garden." She went on a few steps, then looked back at him. "I suppose you don't feel inclined to row me about for a little while? But no—perhaps you don't feel energetic; never mind!" and she walked on.

Dick watched her, irresolutely, for a moment, then threw away his cigar and followed her to the boat.

CHAPTER VIII

The morning was absolutely delicious. Nature was in her happiest mood. The magpies were warbling in the Kurrajong tree. A faint breeze was blowing gently. The sky was softly blue—a few fleecy clouds floated overhead.

It was nine o'clock, the buggy had just come round; Dick sat holding the horses, ready to drive Halkett to the train. Dolly had arranged to accompany them to "see Frank off," and as she appeared, framed in a background of grape vines, her pink cotton frock struck the exact note of colour wanting in the picture.

"Come along, Frank; what kept you so long? I've been waiting."

The big brother smiled. "I'm so sorry, dear! Where's Miss Wingham? She'll be lonely, won't she?"

"Oh no! Isabel's never lonely. She said she'd stay in the house and do some sewing. Even in India she used to sew in the mornings. I could no more do it than fly!"

"Never mind! I like to see a girl sewing. Shows she's got some sense and isn't given over entirely to frivolity."

"Now, Frank, if you're going to point the moral I shall get out!"

"Please, don't!" said Dick. "Quandong and Chance are rather fresh after a long spell; they'll probably object to stand while I open the gates. Won't you relent?"

"If you put it in that way I can't refuse!"

. . . . . .

"May I smoke?" asked Dick, when the train moved off and he turned the horses' heads homewards.

"Oh, do," was the reply.

He gave her the reins, produced a tobacco-pouch, filled his pipe, then struck a match and lit it—shading it with his hand against the wind.

"I don't know what I should do without my pipe. It's such a companion to a man."

"I've always heard it's very soothing. I've noticed that the best-tempered men all smoke. Non-smokers, as a rule, are either dictatorial or pig-headed."

"There's a certain amount of truth in that."

There was a still, lazy feeling in the air as the buggy bowled along the dandelion-covered paddocks.

"You remind me of a man I knew in India," Mrs. Vane said, as they reached a gate.

"Do I?" getting out to open it, while Dolly drove the horses through.

"Yes, quite a nice man; he stayed with us occasionally."

"Was he a soldier?"

"Oh no; he held a high position in the railway. We made friends over the piano, as he admired my singing; and, as he sang delightfully himself, I played his accompaniments."

"I see!"

"He said I reminded him of his wife."

"Oh! You didn't say he was married."

"He was a grass-widower; his wife and children lived in Bedford. He was an attractive person, too, with a turn for flirtation, and if he had belonged to me I shouldn't have left him alone."

"But *you* didn't flirt with him, surely?"

"Of course not. We were great friends. He took the trouble once to send me a basket of superior mangoes, because he overheard me say 'I adored them.' Geoffrey teased me unmercifully about it."

"Is that all the damage you did him?"

"No—that is—he arrived in time for a dance at the Club once. We had theatricals first. I was playing 'Yum-Yum' in *The Mikado*."

"Yes?"

"Well, Mr. Heathcote and I found our steps suited admirably, so we had several waltzes and 'The Boston' together, sitting out most of the squares in a *kala jugga*."

"For shame, Mrs. Vane!"

Dolly blushed.

"Any more?"

"No, that's all. I had to go home soon after."

"My sympathies are entirely with the grass-widower. I really think you ought to be labelled 'dangerous.' Fortunately, there are no grass-widowers with detachable affections here."

Dolly looked demure. "No? Well—perhaps it is better so!"

. . . . . .

Now while things were going on in this cheerful manner at Collaroi, the Hammond family received a blow which shook its very foundations. Mrs. Merivale developed influenza; a nurse was hurriedly summoned; the doctor was in attendance. Lou-Lou was forbidden her mother's room; and Mary undertook to amuse her in another part of the house while nurse was busy.

"My giddy aunt!" ejaculated Peter, finding Mary and her small niece in the garden next day.

"You'd better not go in," she advised. "Having just recovered from one illness, it's not well to risk another. Stay here with Lou-Lou. I'll tell Jane to bring tea to the summer-house."

When Mary returned she found Peter sitting in the summer-house with the child, telling her the story of Cinderella.

"How's the tennis? You haven't lost your complexion yet—you'd better not, or what will 'Fly-by-Night' say?"

"Didn't I tell you *not* to call Mr. Upton that horrid name. I've given up the tennis till Bee gets better."

Suddenly Lou-Lou caught sight of the post-man.

"Aunty Mare-wee—posty-man come; baby get letters." She rushed across the grass to meet him. He put some letters and a *Ladies' Field* into her hands, and she flew back.

"I'll sort 'em for you," said Peter. "Those bills are for your governor—three for Mrs. Merivale and two for you. The top one is 'Fly-by-Night's,' I'm convinced. Do you want to read it alone?"

"Don't be a goose."

"Well, what is he doing? Is it lonely up there in the back blocks?"

"Not at present; Mr. Halkett is there just now with his sister. She is a young widow, out from India on a visit."

"Whe—ew!" whistled Peter. "Indeed, from India, is she?" with a wicked smile; "*and* a widow. I know the brand! I've often met 'em at the Yacht Club in Bombay. Well, my dear young friend, she's probably flirting desperately with your 'Fly-by-Night' (I beg your pardon, *Mis*-ter Upton). I never knew an Anglo-Indian matron yet—let alone a widow—who could keep from flirting with the nearest man."

Mary went into peals of laughter.

"I'm afraid your experience of Anglo-Indian women has not been happy. Dick says she's quite a nice little woman. But don't try to persuade me that Dick is flirting desperately with *any* widow! Of course they are good friends—but, as for anything further, I wouldn't believe you if you talked from now till doomsday!"

"Oh, you're very confident," said Peter; "but you don't know the cult. I do. However, don't mind me. Men are only human—even the best of them. Well, I must be going on. Good-bye, Lou-Lou. Aunty Mary's cross; say 'Naughty aunty.'"

"'Aughty aunty," Lou-Lou repeated solemnly. "Baby love Peter. Baby wanth chocky —Peter—*de*-ar."

"You little rogue! It's only cupboard love that you feel!"

"Mary," called a voice.

"There's mother. I must go. Good-bye; we shall often be out here in the afternoon."

She picked Lou-Lou up in her arms and departed.

CHAPTER IX

SHEARING was nearly over—they expected to "cut out" on Thursday. This expectation was justified, to the intense gratification of Dick and Mr. Warnock. To an onlooker, who had seen Collaroi the day before, such a consummation would have appeared hopeless. But much is possible with untiring energy. Luckily, the weather was fine. Half a day's rain would have put back the work. As it was, Warnock and the book-keeper had been up nearly all night to get the men's accounts made out and their cheques ready to hand over.

The teamsters had not been idle—their waggons would be loaded up before sundown. At daylight next morning they would all be breakfasting, with their bullocks ready to yoke up. The shearers are gone; the shed hands and "rouse-abouts" have departed, mostly on foot, swag-laden and determined of aspect.

Then Dick began to realise that shearing was finally over.

Relieved of their anxieties, the whole district indulged in relaxation in the shape of bi-weekly polo practices on the Garulan ground, which Bertie Hastings had rolled for the purpose.

A match against their rivals—the Willurahs—had been arranged to take place shortly. This well-known team, consisting of the three brothers Lawley and Neil M'Master, hailed from the Willurah district, about forty miles from Collaroi.

The Garulan men—Charley Wharton, Dick Upton, and Bob Elliott (the secretary of the Club)—were all ably instructed by their captain, Bertie Hastings, practising their hardest against the eventful day.

Mr. Elliott had been persuaded by Bob to present a silver cup to be called " The Elliott Cup," which was to be played for at the match. The winning team were entitled to hold it for the year. If after that they were victorious on two other occasions—not necessarily consecutive ones—they had earned the right to hold it permanently.

Charley kept his word, and drove Mrs. Elliott over to call. The visit was most successful. Dolly exerted herself to dispense hospitality so charmingly, assisted by Isabel, that the kind matron was delighted with them.

The rest of the neighbourhood speedily followed

her example, with the result that the tableaux were to take place on the following Tuesday. Isabel and Ward were making the costumes required by the "household"—which included Charley Wharton.

"I'll do anything to help you," Dolly declared, "only *don't* ask me to sew! Give any directions you like to Ward"—and she went out driving with Dick.

The little widow was in a cheerful mood, caused by the fact that yesterday had brought another thick letter from India.

"Be careful of the maiden with the dimple in her chin," sang Dolly, as Dick gave her the reins, and got down to open the second gate. She drove the horses through, then went on deliberately.

"What a little tease it is!" following the buggy. "She's just a spoilt child."

. . . . . .

"We're a good way from home," Dick said. "It must be past lunch-time. I think we'd better camp for a bit. I'll light a fire and make you some tea."

"Brilliant idea! But you haven't got any tea on board?"

"I thought we might be late, so I made Elizabeth give me some tea and sugar and a

bottle of milk—and *I think* there might be egg-sandwiches."

"Why, it's a regular surprise-party!" Dolly exclaimed.

Dick drove the buggy into a shady place, where an old log lay among the daisies.

Clusters of starry clematis and violet-tinted kennedya twined round the tree-trunks, hanging in long festoons from the branches. A blue-throated kingfisher sat swinging on the lowest bough of a gum tree. Spring, with all its illusive, oft-renewed promises, was everywhere. Once again it told the old story of hope, love, happiness—all to be fulfilled this year—more convincingly than ever, while the scent of wattle blossom filled the air.

"I'll take the horses out and give them a drink at the creek," remarked Upton. "Sit there till I come back, and we'll have lunch."

She seated herself on the aged log, whose blackened end, together with the little heap of grey ashes, showed plainly that other wayfarers had halted there for refreshment. She gazed at the smiling face of nature, bathed in brilliant sunshine. "What a radiant day! It must be nice to feel absolutely happy. Why can't I? Surely, with all that blue heaven, there *must* be a little spare piece for me!" She watched

Dick take out the horses and lead them towards the creek. "Strange how often he reminds me of Jack—and yet their faces are not at all alike. Poor Jack! Really, I ought to feel ashamed of myself. I wonder what he would have said if he had seen us in the boat last night; but, really, life in the bush isn't fit for human consumption without—salt."

Presently Dick returned, and, tying up the horses to a tree, collected grass and dead sticks for a fire.

"You're an experienced bushman."

He laughed. "I'm an old hand at this game," placing the "billy" on the fire, now blazing up merrily. "But you ought to be laying the table."

. . . . . .

"Isn't this restful?" said Mrs. Vane, when lunch was over and Dick was lighting his pipe.

She was half-sitting, half-reclining on the grass as she leant back against the old log. Her companion didn't answer; he went on pressing the golden-brown tobacco into the bowl of his pipe, using the ball of his left thumb for the purpose.

"I said—'Isn't this restful?' How dare you ignore my remarks?"

"What a child you are! And a spoilt child

at that," seating himself on the grass at her feet. "You might be a schoolgirl of sixteen!"

"That's exactly what I feel"—with a flash of the grey eyes—"a naughty child. Let's pretend I am—for the rest of to-day. Shall we —Dick?"

"You shall be obeyed. Sing me the song you sang last night; something about May—'The Meaning of May,' wasn't it?"

"Oh, you mean 'A Song of May'"—a little smile played round her mouth. She took off her hat and began to sing softly, looking straight into Dick's eyes—

"In the greenest growth of the May-time
I rode where the woods were wet;
Between the dawn and the day-time
The Spring was glad that we met.

"There was something the season wanted,
Though the ways and the woods smelt sweet;
The breath at your lips that parted
The pulse of the grass at your feet.

"You came, and the Sun came after,
And the green grew golden above,
And the flag-flowers lightened with laughter,
And the meadow-sweet shook with love.

"And a bird overhead sang 'Follow,'
And a bird to the right sang 'Here,'
And the arch of the leaves was hollow,
And the meaning of May was clear—the meaning of May was clear!"

. . . . . .

It was growing dusk; as they drove through the last paddock a man appeared galloping towards them at racing speed.

"Something must have happened!" Dick said. "What on earth can it be?"

"Good gracious! Let us hope Isabel hasn't fallen down the well."

As the horseman drew near they saw that it was Billy, the mail-boy. He was evidently violently excited—his eyes were nearly starting out of his head as he pulled up.

"Well, what is it?" asked Dick.

"The store, sir!" the boy gasped out as soon as he could speak. "The store's on fire!"

"Good God! how did it happen?"

"Mr. Phillips was away this afternoon—he come back just now, and told me to clear out and tell you. Joe Blundell seen it first—he's workin' like a nigger—but the fire got such a start."

Dick muttered an ugly word and put the horses to a gallop.

CHAPTER X

All was bustle and commotion at the home station when they reached it. A thick volume of dense blue smoke, interspersed with dancing flames, issued from the roof of the store. Half a dozen men, headed by the store-keeper, were rushing feverishly in and out, with their arms full of groceries, boots, and Crimean shirts, trying to save as much as possible of the contents of the building.

Dick hastily threw the reins to Mrs. Vane, and tearing off his coat, dashed in to help them. Joe Blundell, the ci-devant swagman, who had come in that day to get his cheque, was in the thick of the fray, working like a horse. He had hurriedly organised the station hands to form a line of buckets from the river, got two water-carts drawn up close to the door, and had now tied a couple of ladders together and gone up, followed by his mate, to the attic, where a quantity of goods and shearing requisites were stored, with a view to throwing them from the window.

The fire raged fiercely on with unrelenting vigour. The little army of men strained every nerve in desperate efforts to cope with it. But the flames had got such a hold it seemed well-nigh impossible to save the building.

Suddenly, with a sickening crash, the attic floor fell in.

"My God!" ejaculated Dick, who had just managed to get out of the way of the falling timbers. "Blundell will be killed."

But at that very instant two or three stockmen dashed in amongst the smoking débris and dragged out the burnt and blackened bodies—still breathing, mercifully—of poor Joe and his mate.

. . . . . .

"Poor chap! I'm afraid you've had a bad time of it. Do you feel any better to-day?" Dick asked compassionately, standing beside Joe's bunk three days later. They had carried him into the men's hut and made him as comfortable as they could. Old Davy, the cook, a good-natured soul, had done his best to look after him and attend to his burns, according to the doctor's instructions.

The sick man looked worn and weak as he lay there with his bandaged head and white face drawn with pain from his terrible burns. He

made a plucky attempt to smile cheerfully as he said—

"Yes, I feel easier now, boss! Things were a bit thick at first; but I'll be up again afore yer can turn round. Them burns don't pain so bad now."

"I'm very glad to hear it, Blundell. We owe you a debt of gratitude," said Dick. "But for your valuable assistance there wouldn't have been a stick of the building left or any of the stores saved. As it is, we got out nearly everything on the ground floor, and the shell remains standing. So we must just put it up again as quickly as we can."

"That's all right, boss!" said Joe, taking a mouthful of gruel from the cup which stood on a wooden stool beside him. "I done no more than the other chaps. I owed you a good turn; you helped me when I was a sore-footed tramp, and give me work when I wanted it bad. So it was up to me to lend a hand if I could when things went wrong."

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The eventful night on which the long-expected tableaux were to take place had arrived, and every one was in a state of excitement.

Bertie Hastings, his sister, and Miss Kitty Waters, who was staying with them, had driven over early in the forenoon, and Charley, who

had also arrived, had just been assisting Miss Wingham to put French chalk on the dining-room floor, as the company were to dance there.

"The visitors will have to drive home to-night," said Isabel. "We haven't an inch of room to put up any one."

"Exactly, seeing I've bagged the only spare bed in the bachelors' quarters. But they're used to going home after a dance; besides, it's bright moonlight. Gad! I'll never forget going to a dance in Queensland, just after I came out last year, and driving home at 5 a.m.! I was staying at the next station with some people who came out with me on the *China*. We had fifteen miles to get home, and were unlucky enough to break the pole going through the scrub. It took us some time to get it spliced up, and when we got under way a terrific thunderstorm came on. You never saw such rain—a regular tropical downpour. We were drenched to the skin. When we got to Hampden Downs the girls went to get dry clothes, while the other man and I walked into the kitchen and warmed ourselves by the fire till the Chinese cook made us some tea."

"What are you two gossiping about?" asked Dolly. "That far corner wants more chalk!"

"Quite true! By the way, who is to officiate as orchestra?" asked Wharton. "Miss Hastings

and Miss Waters are our two leading ladies; the former plays delightful waltzes from favourite songs."

"While Miss Waters has the newest dance music," put in Bertie.

"Really? That's splendid."

Kitty Waters looked up. "I shall be delighted to play for you."

"So shall I," echoed Nelly Hastings.

"It's very sweet of you. We have one 'musicianer' on the premises, in the shape of Mr. Phillips."

"Of course! I'd forgotten Phillips. Would you like my black boy Billy? He's splendid on the concertina!"

Dolly laughed. "We need not trouble him. Miss Blake and her sister have promised to play; so did Mrs. Scott and Miss Lovell. Isabel will give us a waltz or two. I believe I can struggle through a two-step."

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The evening was in full swing—everything was going splendidly. The neighbours from Garulan, Mungelgumbie, Combogle, Moryanbone, and Weanerbah had arrived in buggy, cart, and waggonette-loads, together with a sprinkling of men and girls, who had driven in from Willurah to partake of a large and informal "high tea."

The tableaux were to begin at eight o'clock, so as to be finished in time for the dancing. Mrs. Vane's big bedroom did duty as dressing-room, from which a bevy of light-hearted damsels had emerged in expectation of a cheery evening.

Halkett was an admirable host; he seemed to be everywhere at once, making the guests feel at home, and keeping the ball rolling merrily.

The curtain went up suddenly, disclosing Dolly as 'Yo San' in *The Darling of the Gods*.

"Doesn't she look sweet?" said Kitty Waters to Bertie. They were sitting at the back of the audience, and had been having a little confidential conversation before the curtain went up.

"What an adorable little Jap!"

"Rather!" said Hastings, watching the slight figure in the grey kimono, embroidered with pink chrysanthemums, in the act of catching the butterfly.

Mrs. Vane presented a delicious vision of the East; the Japanese accessories rendered her more fascinating than ever.

"You could do that," Bertie said, in a low voice.

"Go away, flatterer!" said Kitty, with an upward glance.

"Do you mean that?" said Hastings, pretending to rise.

"Foolish boy!" she whispered.

"Excellent! Excellent! Very good indeed!" exclaimed the audience, as *The Peacemaker* was presented. Isabel looked the injured heroine to the life.

Alice Lovell made a charming "Peacemaker," and Charley was much admired as the lover.

The Country Girl followed next, when Dolly was bewitching in short frock and flowery hat, supported by Dick as Lord Grassmere.

Then came a long wait; the statue scenes from *A Winter's Tale* were being arranged. All eyes watched the curtain eagerly.

At last it rose slowly, revealing Hermione, the statue, standing on a pedestal before a crimson curtain. The girl's clean-cut profile stood out like a cameo against the glowing background, while the white crêpe de chine, draped in classic folds round her graceful figure, looked so like marble one almost saw the marks of the chisel!

There was a storm of applause from the delighted audience when the curtain fell. It had to be raised three times.

In the second scene Hermione had come down from her pedestal, and was about to embrace Perdita, while Leontes stood beside her. This was even more appreciated. The people clapped

again and again, refusing to let the curtain fall.

. . . . . .

"I feel quite worn out," Isabel told Charley, when she returned, after changing into her evening dress. Dancing was in full swing, and every one was whirling round to the strains of "The Merry Widow."

"Poor Hermione! I suppose you know you promised me this waltz—but we will only dance a few turns." He offered her his arm, and they mingled with the crowd.

"Very hot, isn't it?" Isabel said, fanning herself, as they stopped by one of the open French windows. As she spoke, Kitty and Bertie Hastings passed into the verandah and disappeared down the garden.

"Yes; this room isn't large enough to dance in. Let's go outside and get cool; besides——" He stopped, and leading her out they wandered down a winding path.

As they disappeared behind a clump of pampas grass, a third couple, who were leaning over the vine-wreathed fence, looked round.

"Why, it's Isa and Mr. Wharton," remarked Dolly. "She looked beautiful as 'Hermione.'"

"She did indeed! Doesn't it strike you that

those two have been rather taken up with each other lately ? "

" Oh, there's nothing in it. Isabel is used to being admired. The men flocked round her at Belgaum ; she was nice to them all, but had no favourites. It's a principle I've always strictly adhered to."

" Have you really ? Are you quite sure of that, Dolly ? "

She looked away from him and kicked the little pebbles at her feet.

" Well—nearly always—at least——"

Dick came a step nearer. " Dolly," he said huskily.

She kept her eyes on the ground. He whispered in her ear. She hesitated—then followed him down the path leading to the greenhouse.

" What a charming retreat ! " as Dick led the way to a seat. But Dolly was in no hurry to sit down. She stood for a moment facing him—the moonlight falling on the slight, white-robed form framed in clustering creepers.

Dick gazed at her. " The little figure," he murmured.

" Why did they build it so far away ? " inquired the enchantress, looking up at him.

Dick lost his head completely. " You little witch ! " he said, catching her in his arms.

"What is there about you that holds one so?" He bent his head to hers and covered her face with passionate kisses, then, holding her at arm's length—"Do you mean this, Dolly?" he demanded, "or are you flirting with me?"

Mrs. Vane looked into the face bending over her. "Flirting?" she said innocently. "Flirting with *you*, Mr. Upton? I thought we were very great friends."

"Did you? D'you think any living man could stay in the same house for weeks, driving with you almost daily, boating with you, sitting with you in the moonlight on the verandah, evening after evening—as I've done—and remain merely 'very great friends'? It isn't in human nature, and I don't pretend to be anything but human."

Mrs. Vane was enjoying herself immensely. A delicious sense of triumph stole over her at the idea of having at last — after weeks of endeavour—succeeded in subjugating Dick. He was really an interesting person—those tall, masterful men always appealed to her.

Her conscience pricked her severely about Dick's fiancée and the absent Jack, but she refused to listen to it, telling herself that it wasn't her business about Miss Hammond—and Jack was far away in India, and would never

know. Besides, if he had been here this wouldn' have happened.

"Oh, here you are!" said a voice.

She turned, to behold Wharton looking at her with a roguish expression. "I have searched the garden for you. I hope you remember this is our dance?"

Dolly looked at her programme. "Dear me, so it is! So glad you found me; Mr. Upton and I were arguing, as usual."

CHAPTER XI

"WELL, I've done it this time!" announced Wharton, encountering Dick on his way to the bathroom next morning.

"You haven't——?"

"Yes, I have. Come into my room and I'll tell you about it."

"Well," when the door had closed behind them, "fire away!"

"I proposed to Isabel last night, and she accepted me. Congratulate me, old chap! I'm the happiest of men!"

"Rather! Miss Wingham is a splendid girl. But don't expect me to be astonished—after the way you have devoted yourself to her lately! What do you think Miss Hunter will have to say? I thought you were such an admirer of Miss Amy's?"

"So I was. I am now. She's a ripping girl. But—hang it all, man—this is quite different. I never felt anything like it! *You* ought to know."

Dick winced. "You'd better hurry up," he said. "Breakfast is just ready."

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"Well, young woman," said Mrs. Vane, "what does this mean?"

Isabel was looking radiant.

"Mr. Wharton asked me last night," she said simply, "and I said 'Yes.' You don't mind, do you? We are so happy. It's beautiful to feel like that."

"Really? Is this my calm, self-contained Isabel? And what about his people in England?"

"Charley wrote a letter before breakfast to catch the mail, asking his father's consent, and begging him to cable in reply."

"What energy! That young man deserves to get on. But you're not going to desert me yet, are you?"

"Oh, Dolly, of course not! Nothing is settled. I'll stay as long as you want me. I don't suppose we shall be married for ages."

"I'm glad to hear it. That will give me time to breathe. Good gracious, there's the buggy!" She flew to get ready for the drive, now almost a daily occurrence.

"You're very quiet," remarked Dick, after they had gone a few miles. Dolly had scarcely

spoken. She gazed into the distance, her lips curved in a smile. She blushed.

"I was thinking of some one I used to know ——"

"It's most exciting about the engaged ones, isn't it?"

"Very."

"It will cause great surprise at Weanerbah."

"Why should it?"

"I thought he liked Amy Elliott. They were tremendous friends. Miss Hunter had rather a fancy for him too. They return next week. I expect Charley will be rather shy at meeting them. I think I'll tell him to take refuge with us."

"He won't require much telling to come. I hope it will last."

"Why shouldn't it? Charley is a brick, and Miss Wingham is a grand girl. I think he's remarkably lucky."

"Oh, you never know. People often swear eternal devotion, and then——"

"Yes—and then——?"

She flashed a mischievous look at him. "And then—they—er—meet some one else."

Dick shifted the reins into his right hand, and put the other round Mrs. Vane's waist.

"Little elusive witch!" he said.

Mrs. Vane turned her head away.

" Did *you* ' meet some one else ' ? "

She was silent.

" Tell, me, Dolly ? " beseechingly. (Oh, Dick, how could you ?)

Mrs. Vane lifted her eyes, and shot one glance straight into his.

Dick didn't wait for more. Stopping the horses under a tree, he tied the reins to the splash-board, and taking her in his arms kissed her over and over again.

" D'you care too ? "

" What do you mean ? "

" Mean ! I mean—do you love me ? "

" I—I—don't know," wondering guiltily what Jack would say.

" Yes you do," hoarsely. " Tell me, darling ?"

" Well, perhaps—yes——"

" You do ? You really do ! " stopping her mouth with kisses. " I'm the happiest man living——"

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Isabel was waiting for them on the verandah.

" How late you are ! " she exclaimed.

" Not at all," said Dolly, going to the mantel-piece and possessing herself of a thick letter with an Indian postmark.

She glanced at its contents, while Isabel poured out tea. A defiant smile curved her red lips.

"He is *really* angry this time. Well, let him be! I won't be dictated to by any man!"

Dick talked and laughed, and told them amusing stories. After tea he departed to the office.

"What a brute I am!" he thought as he opened Mary's letter.

"Dear old boy," she wrote, "I was so disappointed to find that, after all, you can't come up to Sydney after shearing. But, after all, it isn't so *very* long till Christmas, and we can make up for it then. You will deserve a holiday after all your hard work. I haven't been very well, and as your trip is postponed, father suggests taking me to Queensland with him. He is going to leave me with some friends, while he goes to the stations out west. (I shall tell him to look for a suitable one for you and me to manage.)

"By the way, your usual Wednesday letter didn't come this morning. I could hardly believe my eyes. You are always so regular. I hope you are not ill. Father and I leave in the *Oruba*, this day week.

"We have seen a good deal of Peter lately. He has been so good in helping me take care of Lou-Lou while nurse was ill. She is so devoted to him, and he brings her chocolate, and plays

with her by the hour. You wouldn't think he was a day more than *seven*. We shall probably see him in Brisbane, as the *Euroclydon* is going there directly. I hope your house-party is well. Please give Mr. Wharton my kindest regards. I must go now, dear——" and here followed the usual endearing phrases.

Dick put down the letter, and leaning his elbows on the table tried to think coherently.

A photograph of Mary stood on his right, and seemed to gaze at him with reproachful eyes.

"What *am* I to do?" he thought remorsefully. "I can't tell her yet. The poor child trusts me so implicitly. If she only knew what a wretch I've been. I'm glad she is going to Queensland; it will do her good, and help to distract her mind when she has to know. Poor little soul! I'm not half good enough for such an angel."

A gentle knock was heard; the door opened to admit Mrs. Vane. "Are you busy?" she queried, with an upward look that would have disturbed the equanimity of an archbishop.

Dick looked up hurriedly. Dolly had dressed early, and stood before him in a long, trailing gown of black crêpe de chine, the square-cut bodice and elbow sleeves revealing the dazzling whiteness of her neck and arms. She looked absurdly

young—the grey eyes were more distractingly alluring than ever. Coming a step nearer, she laid a hand on his arm.

"I'm so lonely. You've been shut up here for hours, and Isabel is writing, so I came to look for you—you're not angry, are you?"

"Angry with *you*? How could I be?"

"Come and sit on the verandah and I'll sing to you."

He put his hand under her chin, lifted up the little face, and kissed it, then wandered out with her into the garden.

The great golden moon rode slowly through the star-lit heavens, lighting up the sleeping garden into a veritable fairyland, its gleaming pathway mirrored faithfully in the river, rippling lazily on its sandy bed.

What is there about moonlight and early spring that seems to spell romance—in largest letters—in the human mind? None of the poets have ever explained this to us satisfactorily; but no one will deny that the fact remains, and will continue to do so as long as there are men and maidens in the world.

Mrs. Vane arranged herself in one of the hammocks—Dick seated himself beside her—while she sang "Vorrei," going on to "Beloved, it is morn," and "The Fairest Flower," in a

voice which would have charmed a bird off a tree. She looked into his eyes as she sang, and as she looked he felt her spell dominating him.

One by one his scruples faded away as he listened, enthralled by her witchery and the beauty of her voice, till he felt more helplessly infatuated than ever.

"It's fate," he thought. "I suppose it was to be."

CHAPTER XII

"WHAT did you think of the polo practice?" inquired Dick, when he and Dolly were sitting on the verandah one evening. He was smoking his after-dinner pipe, while she had a Turkish cigarette.

"Very promising. You made some brilliant strokes, and Mr. Hastings positively excelled himself—besides being quite the best rider on the ground."

"Hastings ought to play well; he has had the advantage of taking part in polo matches at Hurlingham and Rochampton with some of the best players in England."

"Has he, really?"

"India being the home of polo, I suppose you saw plenty of the immortal game over there?"

"Oh yes! Most of the men I knew played at Belgaum, and the captain of the regimental team was a great friend of ours."

"Splendid! Then you'll both be interested

in the match we are to play against Willurah for the ' Elliott Cup ' next Saturday ? "

" What fun ! I'll make Frank drive us out to watch it."

" Oh, you must come, of course — the whole countryside will be there. You'll be able to see Willurah."

" How far is it ? "

" Only forty miles—you can easily do it before lunch."

" Polo is a dreadfully rough game ! I hope you and Mr. Wharton won't get damaged. I saw a man get his nose broken in India. He got a fearful blow on the bridge with a polo stick, and it utterly ruined his personal appearance."

" Dreadful ! It would be a pity if Charley's ducal nose were damaged ; but I'll beg him to take every precaution."

" Very kind of you ! Do you think Garulan will win ? "

" I don't know. To tell you the truth, I'm rather anxious about it. Cowslip is lame to start with. I've telephoned over to borrow Kitchener from Bill Blake."

" What a nuisance ! "

" Isn't it ? Besides, one of Charley's ponies has got a swelled fetlock. He sent a man post

haste to Willurah for some new liniment Dr. Howard told us about. He declares if it is applied the swelling will go down in seven or eight hours."

"Who are the members of the Willurah team? Are they good players?"

"Well, rather! They're considered far and away the best team in the district. The three Lawley brothers are noted performers, and Leslie M'Master plays a ripping good game, so I expect you'll both enjoy the match."

"That goes without saying; but how annoying that Cowslip should go lame!"

"Yes! It's a bit of a nuisance—only having two of my own ponies to play. If anything happens to Sayonara, it's all up with us!"

"Cheer up. Sayonara looked as fit as a fiddle to-day, and so did Country Girl. You *must* win! Isabel is coming to the battle, and she is most keen that you should distinguish yourselves!"

The week fled swiftly; it was the day before the polo match. The town of Willurah being only forty miles distant, the Garulan team had been driven in during the afternoon by Bertie Hastings, generally considered to be the best four-in-hand whip in the district. His smart team of greys—descendants of the celebrated

Welsh pony Tam o' Shanter—were well worth a second look as they trotted gaily up the main street and ran into Stansmore's stables.

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"Willurah won't have a 'walk-over' *this* time!" remarked one of the men in the Club.

"Think not?" replied the man opposite.

"I'm convinced of it! I happen to know those Garulan fellows have been getting together some first-class ponies; they have never been so well mounted before." The speaker alluded to the fact of Bertie and Bob Elliott having made an excursion to the northern districts of New South Wales early in the winter, returning with all the available "made" ponies with breeding and pace that were for sale—after seeing them play in the Tamerang tournament.

"I can quite believe it," said the other. "Fact is, you see wool is up! These fellows have determined to meet Willurah on equal terms—now or never—as far as horse-flesh is concerned, and haven't considered the price when a good animal was in question. The decisive lesson taught them last season by the superiority and staying powers of the Lawley brothers' ponies has not been without its effect."

"Quite so," the first speaker agreed. "As a

matter of fact, though the Garulans have only met one or two minor teams this season they have shown marked improvement in combination. It has been noticeable that they have devoted more attention to keeping their places than any of the adjacent district clubs. Also, it is evident that since Hastings has taken to playing No. 2, Upton—their No. 1—has improved his game tremendously. Of course, he was always a fine hitter!"

Such was the tenor of conversation heard in the Willurah Club that evening among a few polo men who knew what they were talking about, having journeyed no small distance to see this match.

. . . . . .

"What luck! We couldn't have had a more perfect day!" Bertie Hastings thought, as he looked out of his window at the "Royal" at 6.30 a.m. on the eventful morning.

"We shall have a 'fair go,' and the best side will win." With that—like an astute general—he proceeded to pull his sleeping team out of bed, who, after a good-natured protest, washed down by cups of morning tea, finally went down with him to the river for a swim. From this healthy exercise he brought them back triumphantly—fit, fresh, and clear in the eye, in

spite of a few extra cigars at the Club overnight.

A stroll round to the stables to inspect the ponies—including a fair amount of discussion on the way as to which each man should play in turn—followed by a drive out to the polo ground, put in the morning comfortably.

Then came a hastily swallowed lunch, and it was time for the combatants to arm themselves for the fray.

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Arriving at the "Royal," Mrs. Vane and Isabel retreated upstairs to see if their hats were on straight, when Mrs. Vane summoned her brother, and they drove to the field of battle.

The polo ground, situated on the banks of the willow-girt river, with its clumps of eucalyptus and wattle trees, was bounded on two sides by a huge osage orange hedge, in the friendly shade of which various carts, waggonettes, and buggies —representing the principal sport-loving inhabitants of Willurah—were arranged in a long, irregular line.

All had provided themselves with baskets containing the requisites for "billy tea," as also the necessary components of something more stimulating, for the benefit of the wearied polo players.

" I'll just go and see what our men are doing," said Halkett, giving his sister the reins.

" Yes, do ; and if you see Miss Waters, tell her to come and sit with us."

" I will " ; and he departed to join the players.

It was nearly half-past two. The stream of arriving buggies, carts, and smart pony-traps brought in all the pretty girls and lively matrons of the district, all keenly interested in the match —as also every man of a sporting turn of mind, from the barman of the " Royal " upwards !

The womenfolk — including the wives and relatives of the Lawley brothers, all enthusiastic supporters of their team—got together ; while a select band of sisters and friends of the plains' men collected on the opposite side of the ground, where they could encourage their knights with full freedom and without fear of being " talked to " during the game.

Mrs. Vane, having collected Kitty Waters, drove the buggy to a commanding position.

A little badinage with the supporters of both teams, and now the coin is tossed up for choice of goals by the two captains, Andrew Lawley and Bertie Hastings, each with a jest ; but the look of determination on their faces betokens deadly earnest, as far as the game is concerned.

The " Bruisers "—as Halkett designated the

Willurah men, in reference to their black and blue striped jerseys — were the first to ride on to the ground, quickly followed by the Garulans in brown and gold—"like wasps!" Dolly declared.

"Wish me luck!" said Hastings, riding up to the buggy for a last word.

"The very best of luck!" Dolly assured him. "Go in and win."

"We will beat them if we can, believe me!" Bertie rejoined, looking at Kitty, who returned his glance with interest.

"You must win! Isabel and I will weep if you are beaten—so will Miss Waters."

"Don't talk of it!" said the latter. "I do *hope* Garulan will win! Those Lawleys play such a hard game. They were up at Quirindi buying ponies quite lately, and I know they got them for this match."

"I must be off"; and Bertie rode back.

As the Garulan team formed in line in front of their opponents, a tremor of excitement ran through the expectant crowd.

The Lawleys, burly and strong, if rather short of stature, sat their horses like men well used to the saddle; and with M'Master—a man of similar height, though rather more active in appearance—were a workmanlike four, looking

every inch the effective players they had often proved themselves to be.

The Garulan men were the exact opposite in point of figure, being tall and lithe of frame. They had the advantage of being younger men than their opponents—all, with the exception of Hastings, being under eight-and-twenty. Also, they had been coming on fast lately, both in accuracy of hitting and (under their captain's guidance) paying close attention to combined and unselfish play, as well as calls and signals from their side.

"Are you ready?" said the umpire; and the ball was thrown in. Dick made no attempt to stop it, but dashed straight through the line for Ned Lawley, the Willurah "back."

Wharton smacked the ball out in front as it reached him, while Bertie—already on the move—dashed out of the ruck like lightning. Fairly slipping the "No. 3," he got in a fine, long hit, driving it well past the "back," now turned and riding for his life after the ball, hoping to outpace his opponent.

But, quickly as his pony turned, he was too late. Dick had reached him; Bertie was galloping close on their tracks. "Leave it," he roared, in a voice of thunder, as Dick rode Ned firmly off the ball.

Then coming on with a masterly stroke, he put it well between the posts. A generous cheer burst from the crowd. The red flag waved—one goal to Garulan already.

The Willurah men were not to be caught napping again, however, and after changing ends, some very fast play was put in all round. A splendid run by Bill Lawley, finishing by a fine, long drive for goal, was admirably saved by Bob Elliott with a strong back-hander, which relieved the pressure for the moment, though, after some scrimmaging, a behind was scored by the Willurahs as the bell rang at the close of the first chukkur.

When the teams reappeared on the ground it became evident that the Lawleys meant business. All three were playing at their top from the outset. Andrew lustily cheering on his team, while he worked like a tiger to force the play to the Garulan end. But Charley is a cool and crafty "No. 3"; again and again he checked Bill Lawley's brilliant onslaught, crooking his stick whenever he thought he was safely off with the ball, frequently slipping back into Bob's place, when that eager enthusiast dashed into the fray, he (Bob) being in fine hitting form. Andrew was in turn paying great attention to Bertie whenever the ball was driven up to him

by his "back"; and the two, continually together, rode one another off with great vigour.

So the battle ebbed and flowed during that chukkur, and the onlookers heard the bell without further scoring from either side.

So far the umpires had had an easy time. Not once had the whistle's warning note been heard, the game being so fast and open, with little or no scrimmaging.

Both sides now began to look as if the pace had told—the ponies' sides were heaving, their docked tails bobbing at a frantic rate. "No harm done, however," the Garulan men declared. "They could last if their opponents could!"

A hurried swallow of lemon and barley water, and out they go once more—Andrew Lawley mounted this time on Quiver, confidently asserted to be the fastest pony in Australia.

Bertie is riding his favourite, Little Mary—a handsome bay filly, daughter of Predominant, Lord William Beresford's marvellous pony from India—generally regarded by him as his trump card; Bob Elliott mounted on Jewel—a Queensland mare, winner of several races, bought originally from a drover, and accustomed to cattle camps.

The score was still standing at one goal to Garulan; one behind to the Willurahs.

This sort of thing couldn't last, however, in spite of the equality of the play.

Soon after the ball was thrown in; it was taken with a rush almost to the Willurah goal. Ned was all there, however, and, having got the start of Bob, was able to place it with a strong back-hand stroke in Andrew's reach, who, being turned and already galloping, straightened it up with one or two dribbling strokes, then—with a mighty swipe—drove it well up in front. Getting up to it again first on the flying black Quiver, he hit a goal with a beautiful near side stroke, while going at top speed, just as Bertie was closing with him—a brilliant display of skill and dash.

The applause was deafening from the Willurah supporters, who now thought their turn had come.

This joy was shortlived, however, as the Garulans were not to be denied. Some daring play followed, when Charley cleverly passed the ball out to Bertie, who took it away with a rush, like a destroying angel. That brilliant player, after achieving a magnificent run, eventually put it well up in front of Dick—just then locked level with the "back"—calling loudly to him to "take it on if he could." Upton's pony answered gamely to his call, beating Ned for

pace, and the second goal for Garulan was scored. Shortly after, another behind was registered to Willurah, but very wide of the goal, when again the bell was heard.

This being half-time, it was decided to have the long interval (ten minutes); whereupon every one flocked up to the cool spot under the trees, where the buggies were standing, to partake largely of tea and cold drinks.

It was anybody's game so far, and both teams were in high good humour. Muffled up in their sweaters and overcoats, they were patted on the back by their men pals and smiled on by their fair supporters.

Kind Mrs. Elliott had a word of praise or encouragement for all players who had done a fine run or put in some extra good work. The polo men were getting their second wind, and seemed less blown than before.

But though the Lawley brothers were known to be absolutely tireless—winning, as a rule, the hardest tussles in the latter part of the game—their backers looked in vain for any sign of fatigue in the lighter team.

"You will see the Lawleys will force the game now and wear the others down," said Amy Elliott.

"Don't you believe it!" said Dolly. "Mr.

Hastings and his team are holding the others safely all the time. The Willurahs will never catch them now ! "

" Time's up ! " shouts Alec Wood, and Bertie rides on to the ground with the burly captain of the Willurahs, the latter on Black Bess, a dwarf thoroughbred, own sister to Dungan, the Australian " Grand National " winner.

Hastings is mounted on Freedom, that wonderful old pony, bending his neck, and bridling as he walks, in a way that compelled the onlookers to pick him out on any polo ground ; fast as a Derby winner for 200 yards, yet with a mouth like a lady's glove, and possessing a thorough knowledge of the game. By a celebrated imported Arab, from a thoroughbred mare, he combined the best qualities of both. Probably the two best ponies in the Commonwealth were at that moment walking to the centre mark.

The others rushed for their ponies, and followed the two captains in a trice.

Up and down the ground went the ball, followed by the galloping ponies. The men, by this time fairly on their mettle, rode with a dash and freedom bordering on the reckless. Once or twice the umpire warned a player who came in at a dangerous angle.

The first " free hit " was, however, given

against Dick for "off-side." It only resulted in a "behind," but, immediately afterwards, Andrew Lawley, with a clever bit of play, passed the ball to Bill, who took it along the side-line at a terrific pace, eventually hitting a goal from an almost impossible angle.

It was a lucky stroke, but they all "count," and this made the goals equal. Great excitement prevailed among the onlookers; the pace grew hotter and hotter. Once more the same player seized the ball, and racing down the ground with a determined rush, took it very close to the Willurah goal before being stopped.

Some close work was going on, with plenty of bumping and interposing. Suddenly a peremptory "Ride, Dick," from Bertie, was heard by all. The sportsman in question promptly closed with his opponent, apparently in one jump.

Bob Elliott, watching every movement, had passed out the ball on Bertie's side.

Like a shot from a gun, old Freedom was away, with a clear three-lengths start from the rest. Nothing could get galloping quicker—which was not the least of his many good qualities.

"They will never catch that pony!" Kitty Waters declared.

Many a true word is spoken in jest, and this was no exception to the rule. Andrew Lawley flogged Black Bess right up the ground, but never gained an inch on him, as, with nothing in front but Charley and the "back" racing neck and neck, Bertie, with clean, telling strokes, took the ball from end to end without slackening his pace.

But what is Ned Lawley doing? All held their breath. Seeing no other hope of saving the goal, he suddenly left Charley's side, and, crossing the line of the ball, essayed a near-side back-hander before Hastings could reach him.

But he misjudged Freedom, now absolutely at his top. On he came, full of pluck, without swerving an inch—the old pony would have charged an elephant! Both men struck simultaneously at the ball, but Bertie got there first, and, straight as an arrow from a bow, it flew between the goal-posts. The next moment he was rolling over and over on mother-earth, while poor Freedom, on his knees, hit the ground hard with his head. However, with a strenuous effort, the gallant pony recovered himself, then stood like a rock, his head thrown high and scornfully in the air.

Hastings was on his feet; a mighty roar of

applause swept the ground, as, vaulting into his saddle, he trotted back to the centre.

Ned Lawley's mare was knocked right round, but, active as a cat, managed to keep on her legs, while her rider, though pitched out of the saddle, still hung on, with his arm round her neck.

Andrew appealed for a "free hit," on the ground of "dangerous play," but the umpire shook his head.

"If I gave it to any one, it would be to Garulan; but I'm not going to penalise them by taking away their goal now. Ned should have known better than to take that risk."

Every one felt he was right, though there was no doubt about the "cross." This put Garulan a goal ahead once more, and the rest of the chukkur was played without further scoring.

"This is no runaway match, Mrs. Lawley!" remarked Alec Wood, riding up to the fence during the interval.

"Don't speak to me!" she retorted. "I'm absolutely ill with excitement. My husband is playing his best, but Andrew and Ned don't seem to be up to their usual form."

The umpire laughed. "That's right! Give it to them!" he said. "So like a woman."

"Go away, you rude person; this is no time to generalise!" said Mrs. Bill. "Seriously, though, I was terrified that one of these two men would be killed, when they collided, as Mr. Hastings hit that last goal—only that he was up in a moment. He must have got a nasty shaking."

"Yes, he's not the sort that stays long on the ground when he gets a fall," Alec responded, as he went back to his post.

This chukkur was fast and furious. Again and again the Lawleys attacked with all their might, striving to get level once more; but all in vain. Bertie kept his men well in hand, cheering them ever and anon with a word of encouragement whenever a particularly successful bit of play was shown. Always in the thickest of the fray, he acted as a strong stimulant to the game on all parts of the ground.

"Keep galloping, you fellows!" was invariably his cry, on the principle that attack is the safest defence, infusing fresh enthusiasm into his team by his own conspicuous dash and tireless energy. So the tide of battle ebbed and flowed. The penalty of "crossing" was given against Ned Lawley, much to his wrath. But only a "behind" for Garulan resulted from the "free hit," and with that minor exception the scores

remained as they were to the end of the chukkur.

Garulan 3 goals, 2 behinds ;
Willurah 2 goals, 4 behinds,

was how the game stood when the teams changed ponies for the final chukkur.

Once more the battle waged, and it was soon evident that, in spite of the tough fight already contested, there was no sign of weakening on the part of the younger team.

They were, in fact, to all appearance the fresher of the two, while the attacking came mostly from their quarter.

Andrew and Ned were hard pressed to defend their goal from time to time, and were not driving the ball to their forward players with the same strength as they had displayed earlier in the game. Eventually Bob, meeting a ball with a brilliant forward stroke, followed it up, and—while Bertie and Wharton kept the coast clear—made a fine run, which brought up the red flag.

Tremendous applause from the Garulan side ensued, faintly echoed by the townspeople, who realised that their chance of success was growing fainter.

Bill Lawley, who never knew when he was beaten, was riding all he knew, and doing the

work of two men. Taking the ball on at whatever pace it came to him, with unerring eye he made dash after dash, his near-side strokes in particular being a treat to see.

But it was no go! That wily player, Dick, was watching all the time, never letting him get very far. Either his stick was crooked, or he was ridden off, invariably; while the ball was returned by Bob with decision and regularity.

At last poor Bob, bending low in a mêlée to reach the ball, got a mighty crack on the head from Andrew Lawley, who was now swiping hard at everything.

His reins dropped, the pony trotted on, his rider swaying in the saddle like a drunken man, and, before any one could reach him, had fallen heavily to the ground.

Bertie was off like a shot, and taking the wounded one's head on his knee, wiped the blood from a deep cut on his forehead, which was bleeding profusely.

It was, however, only slight concussion; a moment later he opened his eyes, and with the assistance of Hastings, managed to struggle to his feet. Andrew Lawley, backed up by two fair friends from a buggy, suggested stopping the game for a while. Bob, however, declared "he was all right," and his captain, having

stuffed a handkerchief into his cap to stop the bleeding, asked if they wanted to make a woman of the man, and added in peremptory tones, "We will play on!"

Bob's pony was brought back, the ball was thrown in without further delay, and the young man soon showed that the letting of a little blood had no detrimental effect on his nerves.

With a pretty bit of combined work he and Bertie took the ball with a rush down the full length of the ground. Bertie, dropping behind Bob, made a determined dash, which the Willurahs could not withstand, and, only that the ball happened to hit Ned Lawley's pony, would have got another goal at the last moment.

This check, however, enabled Andrew to reach it, and with a cleverly executed stroke under his pony's neck, he drove it out of danger. Just at this crucial moment the bell rang, and the match was over.

"Three cheers for the Willurahs!" called Hastings, waving his stick in the air; "and one for the captain," to which the company responded by applauding to the echo.

"I never wish to play with better fellows, or expect to get better polo," he remarked, as they rode off the ground.

"Bravo, Mr. Bertie!" exclaimed Kitty Waters,

going to meet him as he dismounted, arriving just in time to hear him say impressively to the groom, " Put Little Mary's feet in hot bran."

" Glorious victory, wasn't it ? " said Halkett, coming up to Dolly and Isabel, who were breathless with excitement.

" Come and congratulate our brave champions ! " he suggested. The two girls followed him, and were instantly drawn into a perfect whirlpool of enthusiastic supporters of both teams.

Then came a confused medley of tea, snatches of conversation, introductions, congratulations, a few hurried words with Dick and Charley. After that, the presentation of the cup to Bertie Hastings, as captain of the team, by Mrs. Elliott, with three smaller cups to Dick, Charlie, and Bob, the runners-up being the recipients of four others the same size and shape. Characteristic speeches, not without a certain eloquence, were made by the captains of both teams, and finally, amid thunders of applause, Bertie drove his men back to the town in triumph, taking the hard-won " Elliott Cup " with them.

CHAPTER XIII

"THIS is what I call deliciously restful—quite the nicest way I know of spending the Sabbath!" exclaimed Mrs. Vane.

She let the steering ropes drop for a moment, and dabbled her hand in the water, as the boat glided slowly under the overhanging willows. Dick and Charley sat lazily at their oars; Halkett had left for Sydney that morning.

"Well, we got the cup, as you wished," Dick remarked.

"Yes; we were very proud of our side. What a handsome fellow your captain is!"

"Isn't he?" said Charley. "Hastings is about the most popular man I know. Every man, woman, and child in the district loves him. He is a real good sort, and the best captain I've ever seen—in any polo team."

"I can quite believe it. How did your polo dinner go off? Did you make a speech?"

Charley caught Dick's eye, and they went into peals of laughter. "We both did," he admitted.

"They filled the cup with champagne, and we all drank out of it — the whole twenty-five of us—to the health of the Polo Club. Then they dragged Andrew Lawley on his legs, but he only said a few words."

"Did any of the others speak?"

"Yes, Bob spoke very nicely proposing the health of both captains. Bertie made a capital speech in return, and when old Andrew got up again he grew quite fluent. After that we drank their healths and sang 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow.'"

"Did you distinguish yourself?" Isabel inquired.

"Rather! They said I made a real good speech. I did, too!"

"What did you say?"

"Oh, heaps of things—about polo being the finest game in the world, and——"

"Yes—go on——"

"I said polo was a splendid thing for promoting friendly feeling among the men of the district, and that it was the proudest moment of my life, and so on. They made such a noise I could hardly hear myself speak."

"What about Mr. Upton?"

"Oh, Dick made a brilliant speech — never thought he had it in him!"

"Didn't you?"

"No. By Gad! old chap, your fluency fairly staggered me. Must have been the champagne!" said Charley. "I remember when I came out on the *China* we used to have a cocktail in the smoking-room at eleven every morning, and they declared the effect it had on my conversation was marvellous! I absolutely scintillated with wit."

"I don't believe it," said his fiancée.

"Oh, *Isabel*! I pity you, Mr. Wharton; you won't be able to call your soul your own when you are married."

"Really, I begin to think you're right," Charley said. D'you remember Ellen Thorneycroft Fowler's definition of the difference between matrimony and single blessedness?"

"No."

"She says: 'Matrimony is a nice dressy garden, with flower-beds, arbours, fountains, and (sometimes) a nice person to sit in the arbour with—but there is a high wall round it, and you can't get out. Single blessedness is a high road, long and dusty, or steep and tiring—the only thing is, you never know when you won't turn round an interesting corner!' Rather clever, I thought!"

"My sympathies are with the latter view," Dolly averred. "I always *hated* the high wall,

and it's so stimulating to come unexpectedly round an ' interesting corner.' "

" Is it long since you turned round an ' interesting corner ? ' " inquired Dick.

" On the contrary ! It was quite recently—and it's so hard to leave these places once they're discovered ! "

" A propos of ' interesting corners,' " Charley broke in, " let's go downstream to Ah See's garden and get some lettuces for supper ! "

Another hundred yards down the river brought them to the roughly constructed wooden landing-place at the bottom of the vegetable garden, presided over by Ah See, a Chinaman who had been on the station for over twenty years.

" What a funny place ! " said Dolly. " Your old Ching-Chong is evidently a past-master, judging from the show of vegetables."

The aged celestial walked between his rows of beans and peas, watering them with two primitive cans, made out of kerosene tins, their bamboo spouts fitted into holes in each vessel.

At a little distance a battered old horse, harnessed to a windlass, was walking round and round, pumping water into a tank for garden requirements.

On a rise to the left, near a grape trellis, stood Ah See's hut—a small weather-board residence

with a bark roof. Various pots and kerosene tins were ranged outside, while a small cask held his supply of rain-water.

It was evidently his weekly washing day, judging by the array of tattered shirts and trousers hanging on a piece of fencing wire extending from the kitchen door to an adjoining tree.

A lean, grey dog came out of the hut and barked loudly, a sandy cat basking in the sunshine on the doorstep, and an impudent-looking magpie strutting about with a proprietary air, constituted the old man's household.

"Hulloa, Ah See!" said Charley. "What vegetables have you got this morning?"

"Carlot, onnyon, lettucee, Flancey bean!" replied Ah See. "Good lettucee, new potatoe!"

"Well, give us a lettuce—and we'll take some new potatoes too."

"I wish those strawberries were ripe," said Dolly. "Look at those little green things—they will just be fit to eat when we depart."

"I'll send you some by post," Dick promised.

"Ah See looks a real old identity!" remarked Isabel. "Fancy living in that funny little weather-board hut!"

"I don't know how the station would get on

without his vegetables! We should suffer from 'Barcoo rot' only for Ah See's efforts."

"He's got an angelic temper too," Charley chimed in. "The cook at the men's hut leads him an awful life."

"Is Chinese hard to learn?"

"It would appear to be. Anyhow, Ah See is quite content with Pidgin-English."

"It's a weird language," said Dick. "Those who have any knowledge of it are mystified at its circumlocution in expressing ideas, especially in referring to dates of expired events."

"How do you mean?" inquired Dolly.

"In this way. I was attending as J.P. at the police court once, and a Chinese witness was asked as to whether he had seen a certain person at a given date. An interpreter was called in, and the questions and answers in Chinese occupied about five minutes, at the end of which the interpreter turned to the magistrates and announced solemnly, 'Your worships, the witness says 'No!'"

"At that rate it isn't worth while learning it."

"Certainly not"—lowering his voice—"I want every moment of your time myself."

"You should see old Wen Cow at Weanerbah!" said Charley. "He goes in for curing every ill that flesh is heir to."

" Not really ? "

" I give you my word, he does. He's an ugly old beggar, with a few rusty stumps for teeth, and when he opens his mouth the rest of his countenance disappears ! The men on the place believe in him implicitly. He professes to cure any ailment by a few dirty-looking bottles and pills. He keeps 'em stored in his hut."

" Does he try them on himself ? "

" Rather ; and as he toes the ' mark ' every morning, they must be a success."

" I've a good mind to consult him about my indigestion ! "

" I was strolling round the garden one morning," said Charley, " when I saw old Wen Cow in a fearful state of excitement. I asked him what was the matter, and he unfolded an exciting story of an encounter with a big black snake, who had dared to invade his ' callot ' bed."

" What happened ? "

" He was weeding at the time, and the reptile resented Wen Cow's paw being put on his tail, so he turned round and bit him on the wrist. Wen Cow didn't cut off his hand, as he had an antidote up his sleeve, or rather in his hut, So he rushed there, tied a big ligature round his arm, and applied nicotine to the place."

" Did it cure him ? "

"Of course! I don't know whether his antidote is known to 'the faculty,' but I'm thinking of presenting it to them!"

"Ladies," said Dick, "I must take you back. Elizabeth will be furious if we keep lunch waiting, especially on Sunday. Charley, bring those new potatoes. I'll take the lettuces."

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"How am I to do it?" thought Dick. "How *can* I tell her what an absolute blackguard I've been?"

He read the first few sentences of Mary's letter, and put it down with a groan. The simple faith displayed in every line cut him to the soul. She had detected a troubled strain in his last letter, unlike the usual tenor of these epistles.

"I'm afraid you can't be feeling well," she wrote; "your letter didn't sound a bit like yourself. I feel in my heart you are worried about something; do tell me what it is? You know I love you to confide in me, and all *your* troubles are mine. Let me share them, dear; that will make them a little lighter."

"What an angel she is! I almost wish she hadn't such faith in me."

He spent hours endeavouring to concoct an

epistle, without hurting her feelings, yet sufficiently unlike his usual whole-hearted letters to awake suspicion that something was causing that "little rift within the lovers' lute" which is perhaps, of all things, one of the most tragic to those who love with all their hearts and are incapable of doubt.

When he had finally closed it up, he lit his pipe and smoked silently.

Poor little girl, he hated disappointing her about the trip to Sydney, which they had planned only a few months ago. How well she had taken his excuses for "not being able to get away," etc., consoling herself with the thought that of course he would manage to snatch a week or two at Christmas to run up and see her. They must wait patiently till then, she averred.

He was glad she was going to Queensland with her father. They were great friends and loved going for little jaunts together. How, in the name of heaven, was he to find words in which to tell her the whole miserable truth? He hated himself when he thought of it, and yet his blind infatuation for Mrs. Vane held him like a vice. He knew it was useless to struggle against it—one look from those grey eyes, and he was hopelessly enthralled. It was as if he were under

a spell, tied and bound by this latter-day Circe.

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"By Jove, I've had an awful time of it!" Charley declared. The two men were driving to the siding to meet Frank Halkett.

"What's the matter?"

"Miss Hunter has been looking as black as thunder ever since her return. I kept out of her way, but she cornered me one morning."

"What did she say?"

"Said I'd treated her badly. She wasn't going to congratulate me. As if I cared. She made a fearful scene. I made some excuse and left."

"What did Miss Amy say?"

"She was very sweet. Hoped I'd be very happy. She had heard how charming Isabel was, and what an exquisite statue she made."

"So she did!"

"She did indeed! I didn't mean to speak so soon. But that Hermione business finished me. I shall not have a happy moment now till I get the governor's cable."

"What will you do if he says 'No'?"

"Do? Break stones on the road, or find

some other easy occupation. Isabel is quite ready to wait for me!"

Then they talked of sheep, irrigation, rabbit-proof fences, etc., till they reached the siding.

CHAPTER XIV

MARY was sewing in the summer-house, while Lou-Lou played with the kitten.

Suddenly she heard a shout. "Auntie Mare-wee, here-th Peter!" Lou-Lou flew to intercept him as he came up the path.

"Hulloa!" snatching her up. "What have I got here? No; ask for it in French?"

"*Donne moi du thockolat?*" begged Lou-Lou.

Peter presented it to her. "Say, '*Merci, monsieur!*'"

"*Merthi, monthieur.* Tell baby 'tory?"

"No, not to-day; I've got a story to tell Auntie Mary."

"Well, Peter! You look quite uplifted. Anything exciting occurred?"

At this moment nurse appeared, and the child was torn away for her walk.

"What has happened?"

"I've won the big sweep on the Viceroy's Cup!"

"You haven't!"

"I have, indeed! They get it up in Bombay every year. I always went in for it when I was there. I had a week's leave on shore once, and was staying at Watson's Annexe, and actually the man in the next room won it! Ever since we left India I've engaged a friend to buy a ticket for me regularly. Half an hour ago I got a cable saying I had won. Isn't it splendid? I've half a mind to leave the service. Hurrah for old England!"

"You lucky person! But don't talk of leaving the service."

Peter had been foolish enough to fall in love with her during these weeks of daily intercourse. In fact, he had come this afternoon determined to find out if there was a shred of hope for him, or if she really *was* devoted to her absent swain.

"I believe you're right. I can't see myself leaving the old service. By the way, how is Upton?" he asked.

"Quite well. He had been for several drives with Mrs. Vane; they took their tea out one day and had a picnic."

"You artless child! And don't you realise what that means?" asked Peter.

"No; what?"

"Why, that she is flirting with him!"

"I don't understand you."

"My dear child, do you suppose she would take the trouble to go out driving 'several times' with him, let alone having a *tête-à-tête* tea-picnic, *without* flirting with him? It's quite evident to me that she is going it pretty hard. I know these widows pretty well, and I can see through this one plainly."

"Nonsense! She might try to captivate him, but Dick would never flirt with her behind my back; *nothing* would make me believe it."

"Well, mark my words, you'll find it's true!"

"Mary"—suddenly changing his tone—"surely you must have seen that I love you? I've done so almost from the first."

She began to laugh. "You don't mean it!"

"I do," seriously. "You *know* I do."

"Nonsense! Don't we always fight from the moment you enter the house?"

"Don't play with me. I'm in earnest."

"So am I."

"Isn't there any hope for me?"

"Not a vestige."

"Are you absolutely certain you love Upton?"

"Absolutely! Of course I like you very much; but I simply *couldn't* love any one but Dick."

"Not if he transferred his affections?"

"He never would."

"But if he did?"

"What then?"

"Would you marry me if he did?"

"Oh, the boy's mad! How can I make you understand that it's impossible?"

"Would you?" doggedly.

Mary eyed him silently. "Well," she said at last, "if Dick tells me straight out that he loves Mrs. Vane, I'll marry you."

"You really mean it?"

"Yes—but only under those conditions."

"Any conditions——"

"Don't be silly. Father and I are going to Queensland on Tuesday for a month or six weeks. We shall have to come back then, as Dick is coming for a holiday at Christmas."

"Are you, really? We're off to Brisbane, too, the end of next week."

"You will just miss us. We shall only stay a day or two in Brisbane and go straight up country."

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"IMPERIAL HOTEL, BRISBANE.

"MY DEAREST MUMS,—Here we are in dear old Queensland! It's so nice to see the place again. It has hardly altered a bit since we left it.

"Mr. Leslie Howard came in to see father, and has taken him off to the Club, so I thought

I'd have a little talk to you. We had a nice smooth run across from Sydney, and quite enjoyed it.

"Father and I were doing a little shopping this morning. Just as we were going into Eschenhagen's, who should we meet but Peter! The *Euroclydon* was suddenly ordered to Brisbane—the very day we left! Of course we made him come in with us, and Peter suggested that he should show me how to make iced coffee in a big tumbler—like they do in the East. I'll make some for you when I get home. You fill the tumblers half full of chopped-up ice and milk, then pour in the coffee, which congeals in a few minutes. It was simply delicious, only I'm afraid we made rather a mess on the cloth, as we laughed so much; some of it got spilt! But, really, Peter does tell such funny stories—you can't help it.

"He came off again at eleven next morning, and we went and walked about the Botanical Gardens.

"It was a heavenly morning, and they were looking their loveliest. I enjoyed wandering down the old palm walk again and seeing the great screen of scarlet bougainvillea unfolding itself as we emerged.

"We stood watching the black swans floating gracefully round the blue lake covered with starry water-lilies. Peter was rather quiet, but he brightened up after a while, and suggested we

should go and have ices at the Kiosk. It felt stuffy on the verandah, so we moved to a little table under the big mango tree.

"We talked about Peter's family in England, and he told me of his mother and the old home, and his elder brother in the army. You know he has no sisters, but his mother must be a perfect dear; and he is absolutely devoted to her. When father came in to lunch he said—

"'I've just seen Mr. Denis Barrington of Minyanda, at Dalgety's; he's down on business, but goes home this afternoon. He asked me to bring you to stay at Minyanda. You'd like to—wouldn't you?'

"I told him 'I should love it.'

"Good-bye, mums darling. Love to Bee and Lou-Lou.—Your loving MARY.

"*P.S.*—We had such a cheery little dinner—Peter was in great form. Mr. Leslie Howard asked father to bring me to Overdale on Friday for the week-end, and Peter is to come too—if he can get leave."

CHAPTER XV

"OVERDALE, CURRAWINYA, QUEENSLAND.

"DEAREST BEE,—Peter got leave and came up in the train with us. When we reached Currawinya, Mr. Macgregor was waiting with the motor. It was nearly seven o'clock, so the chauffeur didn't waste any time on the way. It was a strange sensation—flying down the dark bush tracks at racing speed—but our great arc lamps threw a splendid light, and we saw every step of the way as we rushed along. I could hardly believe we had reached our journey's end when we turned in at the gates and stopped in front of the house. Mrs. Howard and two pretty daughters gave us the warmest welcome, and her maid helped me to dress, as it was dinner-time. As I came into the drawing-room a voice said, 'Who are you—eh?' I turned quickly, to see a cockatoo in a cage.

"He is an astonishing bird—talks like a human being.

"There are two men staying here—Major Danby, a neighbouring squatter, who, Mr. Howard told me, distinguished himself in the Boer War, and tells the most thrilling tales of

his experiences; the other, Mr. Bethune, is a young Englishman—a great admirer of Alice's. He has only been out here six months, and talks of buying a station and settling in Queensland.

"Lucy, the second girl, is very pretty, just eighteen. She came out at the Government House Ball in Race week. Peter has made great friends with both girls, and is quite the life of the party. Mrs. Howard is charming; both she and her husband have been so kind to me. She is a splendid horsewoman, besides being an excellent shot, and they go over to New Zealand every season for the trout-fishing.

"Last night we had some great battles at 'bridge'—Major Danby and I against father and Mrs. Howard; but my luck was out, and they beat us badly. It's a good thing I don't play for money!

"After we had finished 'bridge,' Mr. Bethune was talking about his 'camp-cooking,' and Mrs. Howard offered to teach him how to make a savoury omelet. He jumped at it, the girls flew to the pantry for ingredients, and in two minutes we were all busy.

"Mrs. Howard kept her word; she made a perfectly delicious omelet over a little electric kettle, and we ate it at 11.30 p.m.!!!

"Next morning we all went fishing in the river, but without much success.

"We came back and ate strawberries, when it began to get hot, so Peter and I returned to

the verandah, while Major Danby told us stories about South Africa.

" Just before lunch a farmer arrived, bearing another cockatoo as a present to Mr. Howard. The newcomer was an enormous bird, but, much to our disgust, his beak was sealed.

" Finally, when we were exhausted with coaxing him to talk, he said in a squeaky voice, 'scr-a-a-ch cocky!' The other cockatoo began then, and ran through his whole repertoire. He called the whole family by their names in turn, remarked that 'dinner was ready,' whistled tunes, and repeated sentences, till they ordered him to stop.

" Father and Mrs. Howard, and Major Danby and Lucy, went for a motor ride with Mr. Howard, while Alice, Mr. Bethune, and I went for a ride with Peter.

" We had a great gallop across country, and didn't turn back till dusk. Coming home we lost Alice and Mr. Bethune in the bush; so Peter and I just walked our horses and talked.

" He loves the country, and would give anything to get away to the stations with father and me.

" I have promised him, when Dick and I are married, he is to stay with us whenever he can get leave, and have as much riding as he likes.

" He is a dear soul, and really fond of us all.

" *Later.*—The post has just come with Dick's letter, and do you know, Bee, I feel rather worried with the tone of it. He seems depressed.

I hope he isn't getting influenza! One of the men is laid up with it.

"Poor old boy! I do *hope* he won't catch the 'flu.' But it will soon be Christmas-time, and he will come to us, and forget all his troubles. Much love to you and mother and Lou-Lou.—Your loving sister, MARY."

. . . . . .

"Isn't this glorious?" exclaimed Isabel, drawing rein after a gallop on the black mare.

"Rather!" Charley echoed. They were riding home from the siding, and had brought the mail-bag, tied on to his saddle.

"By Jove, you and Kitty are a picture! I'd like to show you to the old governor. Bob has got a camera. I'll get him to come over on Saturday and photograph you."

"Let's get him to take a group?"

"So we will. I'll get him to take you on Kitty, on the verandah, and in the boat—they will console me when you are gone to India."

His eye fell proudly on the girl at his side—her cheeks flushed, her dark eyes sparkling, her graceful figure swaying to every movement of her horse.

"The governor is quite right."

"As to what?"

"He always says a pretty woman looks her

best on horseback, and if she is well mounted nothing can touch her ! "

" Does he really ? "

" Yes." Then, changing his tone — " Oh, Isabel, what shall I do without you ? "

Isabel turned quickly. " Silly old boy ! I'll write to you every week ! "

" Long letters, Isabel ? " He leaned over and kissed her, to which the black mare retorted by throwing up her head and nearly braining him.

" Yes, long letters."

" And tell me everything ? "

" Every single thing."

" By the way, your little widow has been making the pace a bit too hot——"

" You needn't be afraid. It's only her way. She is like that with any one who takes her fancy for the moment."

" You're sure of that ? "

" Absolutely ! She doesn't care for any one but Captain Wyndham."

" Is that the man she hears from so often ? "

Isabel nodded. " He's in the 14th Hussars —a very handsome man. But she *will* try to attract people, and he got furious over one of her flirtations when he was away pig-sticking. I really think she came out here just to punish him."

"I'm glad to hear it. I'm very fond of Dick, and I should hate to think he could behave badly to Miss Hammond. She is just the sort of girl you would like. How time does fly, darling. Here we are at home again."

He dismounted. As he did so, a little figure came flying through the open window on to the verandah.

"Oh, you've got the mail!" she cried. "Bring it in quickly. Mr. Upton wanted me to pour out tea, but I simply couldn't till I got the letters."

Dick opened the bag, turning the contents on to the table. Then he sorted them into heaps, handing Mrs. Vane several letters and a cablegram.

She tore it open. Her face blanched as she read its contents: "Mildred ill. Come."

Isabel flew to her. "What is it, dear?"

"Read it," Dolly said faintly. "Good heavens! she may be dying; and here am I, thousands of miles away! Come and pack up. If we leave to-morrow morning we can just catch the *Mongolia*."

CHAPTER XVI

"WOMBANDA, QUEENSLAND, *Oct.* 10.

"DEAREST MUMS,—I am staying here with Mrs. O'Donnell for a week, while father goes up to Longreach with her husband. Such a pretty place, with a garden full of roses, pointsettias, and a big banyan tree. The O'Donnells seem devoted to father, and they are so kind to me. She is an Irishwoman, and married her cousin —full of life and most erratic, but intensely amusing.

"Yesterday we had a thrilling adventure. I wonder I am here to tell the tale!

"While we were at breakfast, Mrs. O'Donnell suggested that she should drive me to see a bee farm fourteen miles away. We started about half-past nine, as there is a very steep creek to go down, with sides like the walls of a house. Mr. Parker, the overseer, saw us safely across. He led Rufus down a winding precipitous track to the water's edge, when we got in, and he rode beside us, as it was so deep—it nearly came into the cart. Then, after leading the horse up the other side, he departed.

"Rufus is a big, handsome chestnut, broken

to harness about six weeks ago. Mrs. O'Donnell is a good whip, and absolutely fearless, but has a bad habit of driving downhill with a loose rein, in spite of her husband's remonstrances.

"The apiary we found most interesting. An old man of most distinguished appearance opened the gate for us. He showed us round the hives, and the place where the honey was bottled, etc., taking the greatest trouble to explain everything. We bought two bottles of honey and a section of the beautiful comb, while the owner conversed with us. Hearing I had come from Sydney, he asked 'if I knew a Lady H——, a late governor's wife?'

"'She is a distant cousin,' he said, and went on to explain that his family had lost their money—he had been delicate—and they had come out here to get their living.

"He took us into his cottage, apologising for his daughter's absence, and taking the cover off a new piano, begged us to play, which we did, much to his delight. Armed with the honey, we departed, and choosing a cool spot under a tree, elected to 'camp' for lunch. We tied Rufus to a shady tree, then boiled the 'billy,' and ate our sandwiches. I made the tea, and it was excellent; there's *no* tea like 'billy' tea.

"We rested for a while, then harnessed Rufus and started homeward.

"About five miles farther we came to a steep hill. Mrs. O'Donnell was holding the reins

loosely, as usual, and about half-way down, feeling the cart coming on to his quarters, Rufus began to kick. Mrs. O'Donnell didn't wait, but gave him a sharp cut with her whip. With that he lost his temper promptly, plunged, and kicked violently, then bolted down the hill, and away—at a mad gallop. 'Oh, he's bolted!' she cried. I was tempted to say, 'My dear lady, what did you expect?'

"She held manfully on to the reins for miles and miles, trying with all her might to pull him in, but in vain; he kept on his headlong career. The cart rocked from side to side as we rushed through the air at racing speed. Fortunately, we were on a high road, miles away from anywhere; if we had met another vehicle we must have been smashed, as our cart had no brake.

"At last my hostess's arms gave out; she begged me to take the reins. I was only too glad to do so, and pulled at Rufus' head for dear life. Suddenly the offside rein snapped like a bit of whipcord, and we were left with a bolting horse and one rein!

"There was a good stout fence at the left side of the road, so I pulled the remaining rein, and turned him into that, thinking it might stop him. Much to my astonishment, he took a flying leap at it, landing with his forelegs on the opposite side, while the rest of him remained behind with us and the cart. Then he began plunging. 'Go to his head!' screamed Mrs.

O'Donnell. 'He'll kick the cart to matchwood. I was out in a moment, got through the fence, and finally quietened him.

"At this juncture a man rode up. He had been shooting in the bush, and seeing us flying past at top speed, concluded there would be a smash, so came to see if he could help.

"He and I between us pulled down part of the fence and got Rufus out, fortunately unhurt. While we were doing this, an old farmer appeared, and the harness being so damaged as to be useless, he volunteered to lead us to his farm to get a fresh set.

"He took Rufus by the head, and we started. Unfortunately, his harness didn't fit the horse anywhere, being much too large, and consisting mostly of rusty chains! So it took a little while to adapt it, and by that time the sun was just going down.

"This was a cheerful outlook, seeing we were nine miles from home, had a bush track to find, and two bad creeks to negotiate.

"But Providence again befriended us. I found the bush track, and just as we got into the heart of the bush—with no light but a young crescent moon—we saw a man on a grey horse, standing still, apparently waiting for us. He might have been a bushranger, for aught we knew! As we drove up he dismounted. 'I must introduce myself,' he said, taking off his hat. 'My name is Clayton; I am staying with Mr. John Adams.

Returning from a fruit farm, I met a man who told me he had been helping you after your horse bolted; so, hearing you were going in this direction, I waited, in the hope of being of some assistance.'

"'I am Mrs. O'Donnell of Wombanda,' my hostess said, 'and this is Miss Hammond. Mr. Adams is a friend of ours. I wonder he didn't bring you to see me?'

"Mr. Clayton laughed. 'We intended to call on Sunday,' he said. 'It is rather funny that I should meet you beforehand in this manner; but it's getting darker. Shall I ride in front, so that my grey horse may act as a beacon?'

"We agreed to this, so he rode on. The good flea-bitten grey was so nearly white that we could see him through the deepening darkness of the bush track, shadowed by overhanging trees.

"All went well till we got to the first creek, when Rufus showed every sign of repeating the entire programme. We reached the other side, to find a horse grazing peacefully. 'Why, it's old Moses!' Mrs. O'Donnell exclaimed. 'He has been turned out. How funny that he should stray over here!

"'I'll take Rufus out—he will find his way home—and we will put Moses in his place.'

"We got down. A 'cooee' from Mrs. O'Donnell brought back Mr. Clayton, who helped us to change horses.

"Moses wasn't pleased at being pressed into the service, and showed his disapproval by plodding along in a slow jog-trot, which no admonishing would induce him to quicken. When we reached Goolunga Creek its steep sides looked black as a wolf's mouth. We got out, and, piloted carefully by Mr. Clayton, led the horse down the yawning gulf in front of us. How we found the path, Heaven only knows! But find it we did, after much trouble on the part of our guide. He walked slowly in front of us, leading his horse for about twenty-five yards along the bank of the creek, till we found the crossing-place, which seemed deeper than ever as we followed the grey horse through the darkness. Reaching the other side, we descended, when Mrs. O'Donnell tied the reins to the splash-board. 'Take it up the hill,' she said, giving Moses a tap with her whip. 'He has done it often before,' she explained.

"But she was too sanguine. What Moses did was to run the cart heavily against a stump close to the track, breaking a small piece off the swingle-tree.

"Again Mr. Clayton was called to our help. He managed at last to splice it up sufficiently to allow us to get home, it being only half a mile farther. Mrs. O'Donnell tried to persuade him to come in and dine with us, but he refused.

"Oh, how tired and hungry we were, thankful to get down, stretch our cramped limbs,

and find a good dinner! Father will have something to say on his favourite topic—'Women driving'—when he is told the story!

"By the way, I got no letter from Dick this mail. We only get two a week, so it can't come now till Saturday.

"Last Thursday we drove over to tea with the Crosbies, who have a sugar plantation. This time we took the buggy, with Rufus and a brown mare called Katherine, also lately broken to harness—so lately that the last time I had seen her she was tearing round the horse-paddock in a fury, trying to kick the breeching off!

"You will gather that we had every prospect of a cheerful drive! There were six gates on the way, and Katherine played up at every one of them.

"The Crosbies' house stands in a garden, full of oleanders and Cape jessamine, with a great aloe at the gate. They were waiting for us on the verandah, and Mr. Crosbie drove the buggy to the stable, while his wife led us in. She is a Sydney girl, and was interested to find I had just come from there. I also found she was a cousin of the Fenwicks—what a small world it is! Later on, we went to see the cane fields, and Mr. Crosbie broke off a piece and made me taste it.

"Coming back we went through the orchard, and ate mandarins.

"A violent thunderstorm came on suddenly,

and we flew to the house. When it was over, we got up to go, but Mrs. Crosbie begged us to stay to dinner and play 'bridge.' 'The moon will be up at nine o'clock, and you have a good road all the way.' Mrs. O'Donnell wavered, but the promised game was too tempting.

"Our hostess led us into a sweet room, all white wood and pale blue, where the loveliest baby lay sleeping, his cheeks softly flushed, one tiny arm stretched out under his head. 'What a little cherub!' I said, feeling I wanted to take him up and kiss him. 'Yes, isn't he?' said his mother. 'He was seven months old yesterday, and we have called him Roger, after his grandfather in England.'

"'He is a magnificent baby!' Mrs. O'Donnell said. 'You'd think he was nearly a year old.'

"'Yes; Frank says "he's a *noble* boy!" but that's parental prejudice.'

"After dinner we sat down to 'bridge'—Mrs. Crosbie and I against her husband and Mrs. O'Donnell. At first our opponents scored the whole time; suddenly the luck turned, gradually we crept up, till, to my surprise, at the closing game we were about a hundred points ahead.

"'Good gracious,' Mrs. O'Donnell said, 'it's ten o'clock!' The buggy was brought round, and we departed.

"The temperature had dropped considerably, I was glad I had brought my coat. The horses went quietly enough till we got to the first gate.

I was out immediately, but Katherine objected to standing in the cold, and gave a mighty plunge, in which she got one leg over the traces.

"I stood at their heads. Mrs. O'Donnell undid the trace, and after some trouble got the refractory lady into position once more. Two miles farther on, Rufus got a rein under his tail, while we were crossing a culvert. His mistress tried to dislodge it, but he only held his tail down more tightly, and dashed across the paddock towards the creek. 'Mercy on us! we shall be drowned!' Mrs. O'Donnell screamed. On he flew, and things began to look desperate, till, suddenly, he swished his tail — the rein dropped from under it. She clutched it hastily, and with a frantic effort succeeded in turning his head in the right direction.

"'That was a near thing!' she remarked, as we got back on the road. 'It's a cold night for a swim!'

"I thought our adventures were over, but just as we reached the slip-rails, near the home paddock, the haims fell off Katherine. This frightened her, and she began to kick till I thought she would smash the buggy.

"It took us twenty minutes to 'tame the shrew' sufficiently to replace the haims, but at last we achieved it, and reached the homestead. The dogs rushed barking to meet us, but there was no sign of the groom. 'Oh, I forgot to tell him to sit up for us,' Mrs. O'Donnell said easily. 'He

must have gone to bed ; we must take the horses out ourselves.'

" We unharnessed the refractory pair, and I led them to the stable-yard, while Mrs. O'Donnell got them each a feed. Having left them at their supper of cracked maize, we walked up to the house.

" At the garden gate I looked back for a moment, to see Katherine in a fury, kicking savagely at Rufus, who had dared to approach too near her feed-box.

" ' Isn't she a little vixen ? ' said my hostess. ' Katherine is a most appropriate name.'

" ' Nothing could have suited her better ! ' I replied. On the hall table I found a telegram from father, saying he would be back by the 10.40 train in the morning, and I was to meet him at the station and go on to Brisbane, as we would catch the evening train to Charleville.

" I must go and pack up, so good-night. Love to you and Bee and Lou-Lou.—Always your MARY."

CHAPTER XVII

"HURRAH!" cried Dolly joyfully, as she gazed at beautiful Bombay Harbour, its shipping, the palm-fringed shores, bathed in a silver haze. "Dear old India!"

The deck was full of passengers bustling about, collecting their luggage, before going ashore.

The big P. & O. liner *Malta* was steaming slowly in. The girls leant over the taffrail, watching the crowd of Hindoos, Mohammedans, Parsees —with a sprinkling of Europeans—assembled on the pier.

Closer and closer came the great ship; presently the big hawser is thrown out; a few minutes later she is "tied up," the gangway is down, the eager groups of passengers bestir themselves. A boy brought a telegram to Mrs. Vane. She tore it open breathlessly.

"Mildred much better. Eagerly expecting you. Unavoidably prevented coming.—EGERTON," it ran.

"Thank goodness she is all right!" said Dolly. "Now we will go straight to the Taj Mahal. I'm longing for a cup of 'shore tea,' and I'm sure you are. Tell Ward to follow with the luggage."

Getting into a gharri they drove through the busy streets thronged with natives and Parsees, under the high pink and yellow houses, with their innumerable balconies and lattices, from which peering women's faces looked curiously down at them — the dirty, picturesque, native quarter, redolent of the indefinable scent of the East.

Farther on came broad, well-known streets, lined with gold mohur trees; the noble buildings of the Secretariat, the Post Office, the Law Courts came into view, the morning light falling on pastel shades of mossy green stone, relieved with darkest brown, brightening gradually to terra-cotta.

"Really, Bombay is a magnificent city!" Isabel exclaimed.

"Yes, it's generally considered the finest city in India; but Geoffrey says it's too anglicised. Delhi and Lucknow are far more typically Indian, and more interesting for that reason. We must take a tour among those cities later on."

Isabel did not answer; she gazed silently at the vivid scene in front of her, her thoughts far

away, living over again her last hours with Charley.

"Wool-gathering girl! D'you think I can't see where your thoughts are wandering to? We shall have Mr. Wharton flying out here, when the cable comes—always supposing it is favourable."

Isabel smiled radiantly.

"Supposing it is quite the contrary, though?"

"Well, we must hope for the best, and be patient. Charley and I would wait for each other for years."

. . . . . .

"Go away, you thief!" cried Dolly, throwing her slipper at the crow, as he flew to the window, and stood balancing himself on the sill, with a morsel of bread and butter in his beak. They were in their spacious room at the Taj Mahal; the chota hazri tray had just been brought in, which was the cause of the above.

"The wretch!" Mrs. Vane laughed. She looked at her watch. "Make haste, Isabel. It is half-past six—remember we have to catch the 7.30 train to Purdahpur!"

"I know, dear. I'm all packed."

"I wonder why Geoffrey didn't come to meet us?" said Dolly.

"But do you think he could leave his wife?"

"No, of course—how stupid of me."

Arriving at the Victoria terminus, it seemed as if pandemonium itself reigned inside. The noise was deafening; hordes of coolies fought over the transportation of luggage, all talking at once—the language of invective seemed the only one to cope with the situation.

"Why, there's Colonel Dawson," said Dolly. "What a piece of luck! He can help us with our trunks." In a moment he had recognised her and came across, with every expression of delight.

The platform swarmed with perspiring bronze creatures. Half a dozen of these clamouring heathens took possession of their trunks, fighting among themselves violently. Colonel Dawson said a few forcible words in Hindustani, which reduced them to order. "I hope you have a tiffin-basket?" he asked.

"We have, filled with food, soda-water, ice, etc."

"Good! Wait a moment, and I'll get you some papers."

He went to the bookstall, returning with the *Bombay Gazette*, *The Englishman*, and a couple of magazines.

"You are a dear," Dolly assured him.

"Not a bit of it. And now I must say good-

bye, if you will excuse me. Remember me to the Colonel and Mrs. Egerton."

. . . . . .

"I wonder how they like the move to Purdahpur?" said Dolly. "Mildred has never said much about it, but I hardly think it can be as cheery as Belgaum." She settled herself comfortably, and read the papers, but Isabel sat glued to the window, fascinated by the vast panorama of India. To begin with, there were the frowning sides of the great ghauts, the half-naked ryots in the paddy-fields, the villages of quaintly shaped mud huts, embowered in plantains, the mango topes, the stone-bordered tanks, the buffaloes. Farther on came baby palms, like cabbages, pushing their heads up through the sand, winding brown roads lined with banyan and pipal trees, ruined shrines, and wayside temples. Above all, the natives, of which there seemed to be a never-ending supply. The tiny railway stations swarmed with them, alternating with a few Eurasians.

. . . . . .

Isabel woke with a start; they were reaching a station; a guard was calling out "Purdahpur."

"Wake up, Dolly! Here we are at last!"

"Hulloa!" said Colonel Egerton, appearing at the door. "Welcome back to India, Dolly.

By Gad, Miss Wingham, you're looking blooming."

Dolly flew to him. "Oh, Geoffrey, how is Mildred?"

"She is looking quite herself again. On the sofa in the drawing-room now."

"You're quite sure?"

"Quite. When I sent you that cable I thought she was in for enteric, but it was only a touch of malaria. In any case, she was dying to have you back—and—er—I dare say you are not sorry to come back?"

Ward appeared at the window. "Never mind your things," Geoffrey said. "Moutou will see to them—we will go to the cart."

Dolly climbed up beside him, Isabel got in, and they were off. A quarter of an hour later the ponies turned in to a large compound, rattling up the drive between the mango and tamarind trees; they brought up under the white-pillared porch of the bungalow, where Ramasami—the silver-crested khansamah—stood salaaming on the steps. A tall figure in white mess dress came forward to receive them.

Dolly glanced at him, her face flushed. "Why, it's *Jack*!" she exclaimed. "What in the world are you doing here?"

Captain Wyndham laughed as he lifted her

out of the cart. "I had a bad 'go' of fever, and applied for six weeks' leave. I got it last week, and hearing Mrs. Egerton had been ill, I came over to see her. She asked me to stay on——"

"Did you know I was coming?"

"No; your sister only told me yesterday. I could hardly believe you were actually on your way from Bombay."

"Come in and see Mildred," interrupted Geoffrey, "and then we must go. This is mess night, and we are both dining there. Sorry to leave you so soon." He led them into the drawing-room, where Mrs. Egerton was on the sofa playing with Snow, her white pomeranian.

"Are you *really* better, dear?" asked Dolly, kneeling beside her. "I'm so thankful to get back to you."

"Silly child!" Mildred said. "I'm all right. Geoffrey looked after me splendidly. I never knew he cabled for you; but I was delighted to find you were coming, and—so was some one else."

"Well, good-bye, dear"; and Geoffrey left the room.

"Poor dear. You're looking thin after that fever!" Dolly said, looking fondly at her sister.

"So would you, my dear! But I'm all right

now, and going to enjoy myself, having got you back; but come and have something to eat."

She got up slowly, with Dolly's help, and led them into the next room, where a dainty little supper was laid.

Mildred reclined on a cane lounge. She hardly took her eyes off Dolly. "How well you look! and Isabel too! Collaroi evidently agreed with you both."

Isabel blushed. "I was very happy there. I enjoyed the country life, the rides and drives, the boating——"

"Naturally, considering the first thing she did was to attract our next-door neighbour. I rather wanted him myself——"

"You incorrigible little flirt! How many more hearts do you want to break? By the way, Isabel, there's a telegram for you."

Isabel opened it hastily; as she read its contents her eyes fell—the tears came into her eyes.

"What is it, dear?" asked Dolly. "Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"My brother Archie, at Secunderabad, is very ill with enteric," Isabel said; "they want me to go at once. You won't mind if I leave by the early train? My poor old Archie, what *shall* I do . . . if . . ." Her voice broke—she hid her face in her hands.

"You poor child," Dolly said compassionately. "I'll drive you to the train. Go and pack up. Tell Ward to help you. I'll wire to your friend Mrs. Hetherington to meet you at Waltair, and you can rest there till you get the train to Beswada."

CHAPTER XVIII

"GOOD-BYE," said Dolly. "I think that's all—ice, soda-water, biscuits; but mind, Isabel, don't *touch* fruit of any kind, for fear of cholera."

"Very well."

"And not a drop of water. They will give you tea and bread and butter at the rest-houses. I wish you had an ayah—it's a long way to go."

"Nonsense!" Isabel declared. "I've often travelled alone."

"That's another matter; however, you are sure to find some one going to Secunderabad. I'm *very* sorry to part with you, dear. Come back when your brother is well enough to leave. Write directly you arrive. Stay inside the carriage, and let the guard bring you chota hazri. Good-bye, dear; take care of yourself."

Isabel watched her climb up into the cart and drive off, while the syce leapt up behind and held the umbrella overhead.

How hot it was! The scarlet blossoms of the gold mohur trees flamed boldly in the fore-

ground—it almost seemed as if they emitted fresh heat-waves.

Now she was out of sight of the gay little military station, at which she and Dolly had hoped to spend several months. How little she had thought yesterday of such a contingency! It seemed so cruel to think of dear, debonair Archie in the grip of that dreadful enteric. God grant her dear brother's life might be spared, and that she might arrive in time to be of use in nursing him through the deadly malady which claims so many victims yearly from the bravest of India's warriors.

The hours dragged themselves slowly by. In vain Isabel turned the khus-khus wheels at the windows; in the intervals she tried to read, but her attention wandered. Four o'clock came—the atmosphere began to cool slightly. Finally Waltair was reached.

Here she expected friends, who were to take her to their bungalow till the Beswada train came in.

"Here she is!" said Mrs. Hetherington, smiling on the platform. "I'm sorry Philip is away, but I've brought Max to attend to your luggage."

"It's very good of you."

"Not at all. When you have had some tea

and a rest Max thought you might like to drive to Vizianagram. You really ought to see it."

"Lucy is quite right," said Max, striding after them. "It doesn't seem twelve months since we all travelled out from England, does it?"

. . . . . .

"Ah, this is luxury," Isabel declared, as she reclined on a cane lounge in the verandah—sipping the excellent tea Max had handed her.

"Poor child!" said her friend. "It's too bad you have to go on to-night. When your brother recovers you must come again."

Isabel promised, and Max departed a little later to order his cart. "Boy! bandy lao!" he roared, and Isabel found herself seated beside him, bowling down long avenues of palmyra palms leading to the little seaside village of Vizianagram.

"What a quaint place!" she exclaimed, as they drove through narrow thoroughfares, between straggling lines of yellow and browny-red houses. Some of them were two-storeyed, with latticed balconies jutting out overhead, others with solid, iron-studded doors, which spoke of a long-departed era.

The busy crowd of natives eyed them languidly as they passed through the bazaar and the outlying mud huts of the ryots. Presently they

found themselves on the sandy beach, overlooking the blue sea.

"Let us get out and walk along the sand," suggested Max. He gave the reins to the syce and helped Isabel out.

"If only Charley were here," she thought, as they strolled on the dazzling stretch of sand.

"Here's a piece of cuttle-fish," presenting it to her. "Keep it to remind you of your visit to Waltair."

Just then Isabel's foot slipped on a piece of seaweed; she would have fallen, but Max caught her by the hand.

"Isabel!" he said breathlessly, still holding it; "Isabel—have you ever—changed your mind——"

"Oh, Max, don't be so tragic!" trying not to laugh, and tearing her hand away. "You promised faithfully not to refer to that again. Didn't we agree to be great friends always, and now you're spoiling it all—— Do smile, Max—*don't* be melodramatic!"

"Tell me this—do you care for any one else?"

Isabel blushed. "Yes, I do; I'm engaged."

"*What?*"

"Yes; I forgot you didn't know. Mrs. Vane and I have been staying at her brother's station, and I became engaged then."

"Great Heaven! I came here to-day to ask you to marry me, only to hear that you are lost to me—for ever! I've thought of you ever since we parted a year ago. I always hoped I should be able to win you, and now—by Jove! I feel inclined to shoot myself!"

"Oh, Max, don't say such dreadful things. Do be sensible, like a good boy, and take me back to your sister. I have hardly had a word with her."

. . . . . .

On again in the train, with its innumerable stoppages. At last, after long hours of sleeplessness, they steamed into Beswada station. A bronzed face under a white topee appeared instantly at the window.

"Good-morning, Miss Wingham," said Captain Palmer. "I hope you left Mrs. Hetherington well. I've got some breakfast waiting for you."

Feeling much better after the meal, Isabel went to get her ticket, and was piloted across to a side line, where the Nizam of Hyderabad's private train (in which he graciously permits the Feringhee to travel) was already drawn up.

"I hoped you would have had some I.C.S. men, or soldiers, as fellow-passengers," Captain Palmer said; "but, by Jove! it doesn't look like it," glancing round the platform, which was

deserted, with the exception of a small group of natives seated on the ground, their lotas and brass cooking vessels arranged beside them.

" I'll go and have a final look," after depositing her in the small ladies' carriage, while his boy arranged rugs and pillows, and brought in as much of her luggage as could be stowed away. Captain Palmer strolled up the platform, looking into each carriage, then slowly returned.

" It seems you are the only European on the train," he said, " with the sole exception of the engine-driver. I don't know whether it's safe for you to travel so far alone, as you have no ayah or boy. I would escort you myself, but, unfortunately, my chief arrives to-morrow, and it is imperative that I should receive him, otherwise . . . "

Isabel smiled at his grave face. " Don't be nervous about me. My brother is very ill with enteric, and I *must* get to him as soon as possible ; but I'm quite used to travelling alone. It's only two days and a half, and two nights."

" Well, I wish you a pleasant journey. I trust you will be all right," Captain Palmer said warmly. " Good-bye."

He stood watching her till the train was out of sight. A feeling of loneliness stole over her, fight against it as she would. She stayed inside

her citadel, and issued peremptory orders for tea and bread and butter at the various rest-houses.

The natives had undergone a change since she left Beswada. Hyderabad being a native state, they were allowed to carry arms, and stately Rajputs, Mahrattas, and gigantic Sikhs, armed with tulwars, swords, and daggers, mingled with the crowd of officials and travellers on every platform. Many of the latter, having arrived a few hours too early, lay in white-shrouded rows on the floors of the passages and alleys, calmly slumbering as they waited for the train to come in. As it arrived, they awoke, unwound themselves, and got up to find their own compartment.

"And is it quite alone ye are, lady?" asked a voice, in unmistakable Milesian accents. Isabel started, and looked out of the window. They had stopped at a tiny station, its red and blue walls picked out in white, the straggling line of mangoes silhouetted sharply against a burning sky. It was the station-master, the only European she had seen since Beswada.

"Yes," she answered.

"Ye haven't an ayah or a bhoy?"

"No; I did not bring one."

He walked away and blew a whistle loudly; instantly all four guards rushed towards him. In

a few seconds the guards advanced in a body to her window, salaaming profoundly, while they assured the " Miss Sahib," that the " Presence " was quite safe in their care, that no one should approach her august carriage, and that her slaves would bring her refreshment. The kind old station-master stayed, keeping watch over her till the last moment, when the train departed.

Two more unspeakably lonely days, then came quaint roadside temples, lotos tanks, avenues of banyan and nim trees, and lastly the mosques and shrines, the dark red cupolas and minarets of stately Hyderabad.

The city seemed a blaze of flaming colour. Stately elephants with gorgeous howdahs moved along the narrow streets, bearded warriors, strings of Afghans with camels. A glittering company of the Nizam's bodyguard dashed past, while the thronging crowd scattered before them. Secunderabad at last ! And there was Major Forbes on the platform. Isabel got thankfully out, and heard, to her unspeakable relief, that her brother had taken a turn for the better.

CHAPTER XIX

"REALLY, this place is too lonely for words," Dick said to himself, driving home one afternoon a fortnight after Mrs. Vane had departed.

He thought miserably of their last drive, of her reiterated vow of constancy, in response to his impassioned utterances, when he had felt more than ever under the influence of her fascination.

They had agreed to keep their love affair a profound secret—not even Isabel was to be told.

He had said that *nothing* would make him write to break it off with Mary. And Dolly had advised him to stop writing, in which case her pride would cause her to bring the engagement to an end, when he could explain what had happened.

He hated to think of this, but he told himself again that he simply could *not* write and tell Mary "that he loved another woman."

If it had been any one else but Mary!—but when he thought of her childlike faith in him, he could not bring himself to do it. He forgot that by

leaving her in soul-racking suspense he was being far more cruel than if he had told her the truth.

He drove round to the stable, and giving the horses to the black boy, went into the house. Unlocking the mail-bag, he began to sort the letters.

He thought of the alluring little witch who used to help him do it. Of their evenings in the boat in the moonlight, while she sang to him as sweetly as the sirens sung to Ulysses. Of Sunday mornings in the summer-house, while she begged him "to tell her all about himself and his early life," and again in the verandah while he smoked, and she sang, or told him little risky stories, excruciatingly funny some of them—and being a widow, it didn't matter if they were rather highly seasoned.

It was tacitly understood that, "as soon as he was free," he was to get three months' leave from Halkett, and come out to India for her. And then they were to be ecstatically happy for ever and ever. He had not even told Charley how things had culminated in the last few weeks, and didn't look forward to doing so either.

Turning over the letters, he saw one from Mary, and even then his conscience pricked him as he opened it.

"My dear Dick,—I have had no answer to either of my last letters, and as I have waited ten days and still there is no word from you, I am reluctantly forced to conclude that your feelings must have undergone a change. If that is the case, the only possible course is to bring our engagement to an end, and so, Dick, I give you back your freedom. Don't think that I reproach you in any way. Perhaps it is something you cannot help, and remember that I will always be your sincere friend. Mary Hammond."

The tears came into Dick's eyes as he read these words from the girl whom he had told in the most emphatic terms only three short months before, that he "loved her better than any other living being." No one but Mary could have written that letter, he said to himself, as he sat down to answer it; after spoiling several sheets he wrote this:—

"My dear Mary,—I felt an unmitigated brute when I got your letter. I don't know what you must think of me. It is true, Mary, my feelings *have* changed; I ought to have had the moral courage to tell you this before, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. Perhaps you can guess the reason. I have fallen hopelessly in love with Mrs. Vane.

"I don't make any excuses for myself, as it is a thing I cannot help; but try not to think

too hardly of me. I just loathe myself when I realise how I must have hurt you by my apparent neglect in not writing. Forgive me if you can, though I know I don't deserve your forgiveness.—Always yours sincerely,

"R. V. UPTON."

"MINYANDI, WONGADILLA, QUEENSLAND,
October 12.

"MY DEAREST MUMS,—Peter met us at the Brisbane station. We had dinner at the Imperial together, and he stayed and talked to me while father went to the Club.

"We had a long, tiring journey in the train, but luckily managed to get a carriage to ourselves.

"Mr. Barrington was waiting for us when we reached Waldron, about 7.30 a.m. He took us over to the hotel and we had a good wash before breakfast. At half-past eight the buggy came round with a smart pair of ponies, and we departed to Alexandra Downs, which we reached about 10.40.

"The Athertons live there, friends of Mr. Barrington's. He had stayed there on his way, and they made him leave his own horses there while they lent him their ponies to go and meet us.

"Mrs. Atherton was waiting for us as we drove up, and gave us a typical Queensland welcome. She had expected us to breakfast—wasn't it sweet of her? She took me into the

sitting-room, where half a dozen girls were assembled. We all went on to the front verandah, where a table was spread with scones and tea for 'eleven o'clock.' I wasn't sorry to see it, as the keen morning air had made me hungry.

"One of the girls had been to Miss Clarke's school in Sydney, and knew Alice Vernon. Really, the world gets smaller and smaller! Father was in his element; you know how he loves the whole race of girls!

"Time was flying, however. Presently Mr. Barrington came in to tell us the horses were ready. He was prevailed on to drink a cup of tea, and the entire family escorted us to the gate.

"We went through a forest of dry timber, small, stunted trees, most of them dead, the crackling branches falling around us and getting caught in the wheels as the horses dashed through them, turning and twisting in among the trees and stumps to find the track. At last we struck it, and things became more comfortable —if less exciting. I got very drowsy and nearly went to sleep, while father and Mr. Barrington were talking.

"The wool-shed is our next objective. Our host told us we shall have afternoon tea there, then there is only a short fourteen-mile stage home.

"Arriving at our destination, we skirted round the shed, the men's hut, and various

other buildings, pulling up in front of a neat cottage, screened by a creeper growing luxuriantly over the veranhah, and further adorned by pots of pink geranium. Two or three dogs rushed out barking, and a big yellow hen with a brood of chickens came to look at us. A fresh-faced girl came to the door, followed by a boy, who went to the horses' heads.

" ' Well, Nelly,' said Mr. Barrington, ' bring in the tea, like a good girl ; we are all ready for it.'

" Nelly responded with a smile, disclosing a splendid set of teeth. ' Yes, sir, I'll fetch it.'

" I never enjoyed anything more than that tea. The currant scones were excellent, too.

" ' Well, Barrington, what's the next item ? ' asked father.

" ' Here's Bob with the fresh horses,' said our host. ' We will see the wool-shed another day, Miss Hammond.'

" Baronet and Boulder were very fit. The fourteen miles disappeared quickly under their flying hoofs.

" ' They belong to my four-in-hand team,' Mr. Barrington explained. ' I'll take you over to Chester Downs in the drag for the week-end, and you'll see how they go. I'm rather proud of them.'

" ' So you ought to be,' said father ; ' if they are as good as these they must be hard to beat.'

" As we drove, the whole face of Nature seemed to change. The Gidya forests and Mulga flats

had disappeared, and in their place came great stretches of open country, with softly undulating slopes and uplands, interspersed with rolling plains.

"'By Jove, what magnificent country!' father exclaimed.

"'Yes; it's not too bad, is it?' Mr. Barrington agreed. 'Look, Miss Hammond, there's a wild turkey!'

"As he spoke, the stately bird took flight, and a moment later an emu scudded across the plain in front of us.

"'Look, father,' I said, 'doesn't that remind you of Buckaminjah? Don't you remember how the blacks used to bring the eggs to us, and old Biddy made cakes and puddings of them. They tasted just as well as hens' eggs.'

"'Just as well!'

"'Welcome to Minyandi,' said our host as he brought the horses round with a masterly curve, and landed us at the garden gate. In a moment Mrs. Barrington came out to meet us—a pretty, fair girl, looking about twenty-five.

"'I'm *so* glad to see you,' she said. 'I've been expecting you for the last quarter of an hour. I hope you are not very tired after that long drive? Mr. Hammond, I'm sure you want a cold drink. It's all ready in the dining-room; Denis will show you the way. Come with me, Miss Hammond;' and she led me to a lovely, cosy room, with warm water and every comfort,

telling me to lie down and rest, and she would call me when it was time to dress for dinner.

"*Next morning*, 9.15.

"The post goes directly, so I am just scribbling a few more lines before I close the letter.

"This is a delightful place, which has been added to several times—the real old station-house we know so well, rather like Buckaminjah, with plenty of verandahs, a mosquito-room, and a lovely garden, stretching away down to the shores of a creek two miles and a half long.

"The house is very comfortable, for Mrs. Barrington has great taste, and shows it in the forming of her cosy nest. The rooms, especially the great dining-room, are spacious and lofty. There is a pretty sitting-room, with a really fine piano, on which the little lady plays and accompanies her husband most sympathetically. He has a very fine voice.

"When I reached the drawing-room last night I found father talking to a tall man with rather rugged features lit up by an alert pair of grey eyes. His face seemed familiar. I felt as if I had met him before; and when father introduced him to me as Mr. Joe Marshall, brother of our old friend Mr. Bob Marshall of Mumgadel, I understood.

"Mr. Marshall and I made friends at sight, and in a moment we were talking about his

brother. He asked if I liked riding, and on hearing that I did, offered to send me over a favourite hack called Harlequin. Wasn't it kind of him?

"But every one is kind in Queensland; it seems a feature of the country.

"The dinner-gong rang, and Mrs. Barrington came in, looking sweet in a pretty heliotrope frock, with a rose in her hair. Her husband followed. In the dining-room we found the overseer, the book-keeper, and a couple of cadets.

"Mr. Marshall is a great favourite here; the Barringtons call him 'Uncle Joe,' and he is quite the family 'guide, philosopher, and friend.' I sat between him and my hostess, and he was fairly quiet till about half-way through the meal, when he began telling stories, and related some of the most blood-curdling adventures I've ever heard—some of them a thought too risky. I suppose I looked shocked, as Mrs. Barrington said in a low voice, 'Oh, you mustn't mind him, it's only Uncle Joe! He always goes on like this. If you show that you don't approve of them, he tells worse ones.' I took the hint and preserved a calm front, though I felt myself turning scarlet before we left the table.

"This morning early a voice said, 'Can I come in?' 'Yes, do,' I said, and a little blue-eyed boy came in on tiptoes, as if he were afraid of waking me.

"'You must be "Boy,"' I said. 'Do you see that parcel on the table? Bring it here, and you

can open it. His face beamed. He grasped the parcel in his arms, and scrambling up on the bed, we opened it together. When he saw the picture-book and the box of butter-scotch his joy knew no bounds, and he flew 'to show them to mummy.' When I was dressed, he appeared again and escorted me round the garden to pick a rose before breakfast. Before I go any further I must tell you that I have been feeling very unhappy about Dick. Evidently something is seriously wrong. I have had no answer of any kind to either of my last letters. A fortnight has gone by and still no sign from him. There was only one thing to be done; so I wrote a very gentle letter, telling him it was evident that his feelings had changed, and that being the case, our engagement had better come to an end. I enclosed my ring, and gave him back his freedom. I suppose I ought to have pride enough to feel too angry to mind. But evidently I haven't, as I feel utterly miserable about it. I'm thankful to be away from home, where everything reminds me of his last visit. Here I have to exert myself and be cheerful (outwardly, at least), which is the best thing that could happen just now. I am just longing for your next letter, but there are only two mails a week, so I can't get it till Wednesday. Love to Bee, and Lou-Lou, and your dear self, and do write the moment you get this.—Always your loving child, MARY."

CHAPTER XX

"WHAT nonsense, Jack! Of course I shall stay with Mildred for some time; but if I get tired of it I shall fly back to Australia. I must go sometime."

"Must you, Dolly?" Captain Wyndham leant back in his chair and looked at her. They had just come in from their morning ride, and were having chota hazri in the verandah,

Dolly lifted her mutinous eyes to his.

"Do you think you are going to stop me?"

"If you imagine that I'm going to let you wander off again, my lady, you are sadly mistaken," he retorted.

"Indeed?" haughtily.

Jack looked up lazily, a slow smile irradiated his features.

"The truth is, you haven't been properly tamed yet."

"Tamed? The man has yet to be found who can tame me!"

He smiled. "I could."

" I wouldn't build on that, if I were you. If you're anxious to begin the taming process, I give you leave to try ; but I don't hold out much hope of your success ! "

" Very well ; I'll take you at your word. By Gad ! I must be off to my tub. Au revoir till breakfast."

Dolly sat thinking for a few moments, then went slowly to her room, where Ward had her warm bath ready, and the pretty muslin dress laid out.

Jack's words, though she rebelled against them outwardly, had soaked deeply into her mind. In spite of her assertions to the contrary, did she *really* want to return to Australia ?

A fortnight of her old life with Mildred, now quite herself again, in Jack's exhilarating society, had made her feel as if the past three months were a dream, growing more indistinct every day.

She had told her sister about the love affair with Dick, but Mildred had only laughed, refusing utterly to take it seriously. Seeing the present state of affairs between Dolly and Jack, she wisely refrained from remonstrating, hoping that a kind Providence would readjust the tangled web.

Jack was entirely in ignorance of Dick's existence, as their " understanding " was a profound secret.

And it must be confessed that naughty Dolly was particularly glad that it was unnecessary to tell him—for a time at least.

It would be a pity to spoil his leave—he only had three weeks left; besides, it would be much easier to write—when it had to be done.

Thank goodness there was no hurry; and she went to breakfast. Geoffrey was already seated at the table on the verandah, overlooking the rose garden.

"What a seraphic morning!" Dolly said, as she busied herself with the teacups. "Mildred coming down?"

"No; she isn't feeling very bright," the Colonel explained. "She won't be down till eleven. You are to amuse yourself till then."

The blue pigeons walked about the path, and ate the crumbs Dolly threw down, cooing to show their appreciation.

Snow lay curled up at a little distance, and would have behaved with great decorum, only the Persian kitten came and woke him up, whereupon a guerilla warfare began, which waged incessantly till Jack appeared, to create a diversion by making Snow sit up and beg.

After breakfast Colonel Egerton had to go off to parade, and Dolly expected Jack to remain in attendance on her as usual. To her unparalleled

surprise he did nothing of the kind, volunteering to go with Geoffrey, which he did, leaving her speechless at this unlooked-for development—to read her letters alone.

She bore this solitude for a while, then sauntered up the spiral iron stairway to her sister's room.

. . . . . .

"What is the matter, Abdul?" inquired Mildred, as the butler intercepted them on their way to the dining-room.

He responded in a torrent of Hindustani, accompanied by explanatory gestures.

"Something seems to have happened," Mildred laughed.

"What is it all about?" Dolly asked.

"My dear, it's too funny. The chowkidar has been pursuing his hereditary avocation, and was taken up by the police for stealing seventy rupees from an old woman. He has been clapped into jail, and Abdul says his wife is in a desperate state for fear he will lose his situation here. So she wants to be allowed to sleep in the verandah at night, and protect us in his stead."

Dolly laughed. "Well, *did* you ever! Imagine you and me coming to this benighted country to be protected by one old woman! It's excruciatingly funny!"

"Still, it isn't a bad idea," Mildred said.

"You see we can't go away anywhere, even to a ball—leaving the house unprotected from thieves—without a chowkidar. I think I had better interview the old woman."

In a few minutes she returned.

"It will be all right," she declared. "Chowkidar mère says that if the 'Presence' will allow her to sleep on the verandah at night, till her husband is out of jail, all will be well; no thieves will attack the bungalow when one of the fraternity is in evidence. So I have taken her on trial, on the distinct understanding that if a single thief enters the compound, she loses her appointment ek dum!"

"Poor old soul," said Dolly. "Set a thief to catch a thief. I wonder what poor Isabel is doing, after that ghastly journey through the Deccan? I hope her brother is better."

. . . . . .

The sisters were sitting on the verandah, reading the letters Abdul had just brought in. Mrs. Egerton never entered her drawing-room except at night, or for tea in the afternoon, using the cool, palm-shaded verandah, with its matted floors, and comfortable cane lounges, each with a table, laden with the newest books and magazines. Gorgeous tropical plants in great tubs stood in exactly the right places in the picture;

while the white pillars of the porch were relieved with pots of gigantic maidenhair, Rangoon orchids, and Eucharis lilies.

A cart drove swiftly up the avenue of pine trees, and brought up with a flourish.

"*Boy!*" cried a voice in stentorian accents. Abdul appeared swiftly, and two young men descended.

Dolly looked up; instantly her face was wreathed in smiles. "Why, it's 'D. P.'!" she exclaimed; "'D. P.' and 'Jim-Jams,' as I live! How nice to see you both again. Why haven't you called before?"

"We have been away on a week's leave," explained Mr. de Plastron, *alias* "D. P." "After we got back last night, Lennox told us you had arrived, and I give you my word we nearly came to see you ek dum, but Jermyn thought Mrs. Egerton would rather we called at the proper hour."

Mildred laughed. "You see, Dolly, the state of submission I've reduced them to since you left. It's so healthy for the subalterns to stand in awe of their Colonel's wife."

"So it is," she replied. "I thought I missed something. Now I see it all! How could I be happy without my two faithful followers?"

"We hadn't an idea you were coming," Mr.

Jermyn said. "'D. P.' and I feared we had lost you for ever."

"How did station life strike you after our gay times at Belgaum?"

Dolly blushed. "I enjoyed my visit very much," she said. "There was lots to do; shearing was going on, and we used to walk to the shed. I drove about a good deal——"

"What, alone?" asked the "Jimmy-boy."

"Certainly not; a good buggy, with a fast pair of ponies, is much nicer than your two-wheeled carts."

"And not too many people in the buggy," put in "D. P." slyly.

"Quite so, and no syce."

"Do tell us some more about the joys of the station."

"Well, there was a boat——"

"Ah—h——h!"

"And we used to go for moonlight picnics . . ."

"I see."

"Also we had a dance, and some theatricals, also a polo match—added to which there was a charming summer-house, which I (and others) frequented occasionally."

Chorus: "Oh, why weren't we there?"

"I think it's rather a pity you were not *both*

there," Mildred said. "You might have kept her out of mischief."

"Rather!" Mr. Jermyn declared. "D'you remember how we used to come and take you out on the lake, when you stayed with your sister at Belgaum?"

"I should think I did. I remember you both called on me in state, and left your cards. After that, you never could be induced to come together. I had to go out boating on the lake with 'Jim-Jams' on Tuesday; and drive out to visit ruined shrines with 'D. P.' on Thursday. Also, I had to be *dreadfully* careful what I said to one boy, in case he might repeat it to the other. It was a pity you were such friends!"

"'D. P.' took a deep interest in you from the first," said the "Jimmy-boy" wickedly. "He saw you driving in a cart, and immediately hailed a rickshaw and followed till he saw you turn into the Colonel's bungalow."

"Be quiet, 'Jim-Jams'; I won't have 'D. P.' put to the blush. He is a faithful friend."

"For ever and for ever!"

"By the way, 'Jim-Jams,' what has become of my hated rival, the other little 'married ——' who took your friendship with me so much to

heart? Mrs. . . . er . . . Le Mesurier, wasn't it?"

It was the "Jimmy-boy's" turn to blush, and he did it handsomely.

"Don't be so hard on a fellow! She wasn't a rival of yours. I swear she wasn't!"

"My dear boy, I know better! How she did hate me! Don't you remember the night of the Club dance? You had asked me for all the odd numbers. I sat out most of the intervening ones with 'D. P.', barring three with Captain Wyndham—whom I had just met. As you and I came down from the balcony, we passed Mrs. Le Mesurier returning to the ballroom. She looked at you, and raised her eyebrows, then, giving me a murderous glance, passed on."

"D. P." smiled. "You see," he explained, "'Jim-Jams' had been in the habit of dancing all the evening with her, before you came, so, naturally, her vanity was hurt. She's not a bad little woman. When Jimmy had fever, she nursed him like a mother."

"It's very noble of you to take her part," said the "Jimmy-boy."

"Why?" Dolly asked.

"She always said I was 'slow,'" said "D. P." "But she regarded 'Jim-Jams' as her personal property."

"She did—yes."

"Mildred was away for a week-end once, and I was keeping house for Geoffrey. Mrs. Le Mesurier brought 'Jim-Jams' to call on me, when he was convalescent, and assured me in dulcet accents 'that they had lost their way'—took the wrong road or something. It was such a difficult place to find, etc. I was tempted to tell her that Mr. Jermyn ought to be able to find his way to our bungalow blindfold by this time—but refrained."

The "Jimmy-boy" went into peals of laughter.

"I thought that myself; but there was nothing to be gained by telling her so. I was afraid to look at you, for fear I should laugh!"

"What about your singing?" asked Dolly. "Do you remember how you used to bring your songs, while I practised the accompaniments?"

"I do indeed!"

"He's got about a dozen new ones," put in "D. P." "You ought to hear them. Some of 'em are A1."

"That's quite a good idea! We must have a 'sing-song.'"

"D. P." got up. "Come along, Jimmy, it's time we went. Are you doing anything to-

morrow, Mrs. Vane. May I take you for a drive? We can look in at the Club—on our way back."

"Dolly would be charmed"; and the subalterns took their leave.

CHAPTER XXI

"CHORDO," cried Mildred, and the chestnuts went off. "I wonder if you'll like the Club?" as they trotted down the cantonment road past the barracks, the bustling bazaar and sundry officers' bungalows in neat compounds. "It's a sort of half-way house between the cantonment and the native city, where the 14th Madras Infantry reside. Mrs. Stanhope, their colonel's wife, is a very nice woman. I'll introduce you to her."

"Yes, do. What are those fields over there?"

"That's the Remount Dépot, you must see it—three parts of the horses are Walers."

A couple of natives were working in an adjacent field with a primitive plough and two oxen; the whole landscape wore a rustic, pastoral air.

"What about taking part in *The Mikado*, Dolly? The 'management' are very anxious to have you."

"It's very kind of them; I think I'll say yes. I know every word of it, after doing it such a short time ago."

"I suppose you do; it might have been written for you," said Mildred.

"Exactly; so it seems a pity not to."

"You will be able to wear that lovely kimono again."

"We had some tableaux at the station, and I wore it as 'Yo San' in *The Darling of the Gods*." She paused—her eyes grew thoughtful. Once more she was back at Collaroi, drifting downstream in the moonlight, while Dick, enthralled by the infatuation which held him, told her the story of his love.

At the time she too had felt the fascination of the hour and scene, and yet—how far away it seemed already. Each day those past months grew more dream-like; Dick's face receded further into the background of her mind; the new environment absorbed her into itself, with a myriad chains, growing daily more irresistible.

They stopped at the gate of a thatched bungalow, in a large compound framed in tamarind trees. A line of carts, gharries, and riding horses were waiting along the fence, large pots of palms and crotons decorated the porch.

A pretty woman in a riding-habit came out, followed by a young man. "Good-evening, Mrs. Egerton," she said, with a glance at Dolly. "Are you going home already?"

"Yes; I only came to look at the new papers, Mrs. Fanshawe. Let me introduce you to my sister," Mildred said. "She is paying me a long visit."

"Oh, really! Is this your first visit to India?"

"Oh no! I lived in it for three years."

"Indeed! I hope we shall see something of you. Good-bye"; and she passed on.

Dolly followed her sister into the Club. An open door on their left disclosed a spacious ball-room, with a net arranged for badminton.

A crowd of people had assembled at the entrance to the billiard and reading rooms. Passing through these, with a word of greeting here and there, Mildred piloted her sister to the broad verandah at the back, which opened on to the garden, the tennis courts, croquet lawns, and the bandstand.

Nearly every inch of the verandah was already occupied by people strolling up and down, or sitting at tiny tables, indulging in desultory conversation, while they drank tea, iced lime squash, or "pegs."

A large man in tennis flannels came up to speak to Mrs. Egerton, who introduced him as Major Sandford. He got them lime squashes, and kept up a stream of small talk.

"Oh, here's Geoffrey," said his wife. "Take

Dolly round the garden, and show her the lotos tank, and all the sights."

The Colonel led her past the pavilion, where the band was playing "Our Miss Gibbs," when they came on two or three velvety lawns with sundry couples playing croquet as seriously as if their lives depended on it.

"That little woman with the marvellous frock is Mrs. Dering," Geoffrey explained. "Her husband is away on leave. The man at her side is Captain Lennox, her devoted slave at present. She and Mrs. Fanshawe are the rival belles of the station. You haven't seen her yet, have you? She is a brunette, with splendid eyes."

"Yes; we met her as we came in. I thought her very handsome. She was going for a ride."

"The deuce, she was! They used to call her 'Flirting Fanny' up at Ooty last year, where I believe she had dozens of flirtations; but she is a good sort, and behaves with the utmost propriety here. But the old cats are for ever trying to make up stories about her; they can't forgive a woman for being good-looking."

"What a delightful spot!" Dolly exclaimed, as they came on an ancient tank, bordered with crumbling masonry, green with age, where clusters of pink lotos flowers floated on the water. A green lizard sat looking at them lazily, when

something startled him, and running across the coping, he disappeared among the water-plants.

"Yes, it's a romantic place, isn't it? Always in great request at the Club dances. By the way, did Mildred tell you we are to have a fancy ball directly?"

"What fun! I must set Ward to work at my frock!"

Mildred came to meet them as they returned. "Did Geoffrey show you the lions?"

"He did. I was duly impressed."

Just then a small yellow-haired woman fluttered up. "Oh, Mrs. Egerton, I've been looking for you everywhere!"

"How do you do?" graciously. "I want to introduce you to my sister—Mrs. Vane."

"So *glad* you've come," the little woman avowed. "We all hope so much you will be *kind*, and take the part of 'Yum-Yum,' in *The Mikado*. So unfortunate, you know, Mrs. Leslie getting ill. We were in *despair* till Mr. de Plastron told me you had taken the part at Belgaum. There are only six more rehearsals, and it can't be put off, as Mr. M'Taggart (the 'Mikado') goes to England directly."

"I am delighted to be able to help you," Dolly replied.

"You really will? Oh, thank you *so* much!

I said to Captain Lennox yesterday, 'Really,' I said, 'if Mrs. Vane won't help us, the whole thing will be a fiasco.'"

"Who are the rest of the company?"

Mrs. Dering put on a little knowing smile. "Well—er—*of course* you know Captain Wyndham is doing 'Ko-Ko'—the same part he tells me that he took at Belgaum. Mr. Jermyn is 'Nanki Poo,' Captain Lennox is 'Pooh Bah,' while I," with a girlish giggle, "am 'Pitti Sing,' Mr. de Plastron, 'Pish Tush,' Miss Muriel Vereker, 'Peep Bo,' and . . ."

"And Katisha?" asked Dolly.

"Oh, poor Miss Simpson, I had nearly forgotten her. She has a fine contralto voice—those deep chest notes—so effective, you know!"

"Is she tall?"

"Tall!" exclaimed Mrs. Dering, ascending on a high note. "My dear lady, she's five feet eight if she's an inch! My husband calls her 'Little Mary,' and I'm so afraid she will hear it. And as I always say, 'You know, John, the poor girl can't *help* being so huge!'"—with the smiling complacency of five feet two.

"Do you know, I admire her very much," Mildred declared. "The lines of her figure are splendid, and she carries herself so well."

"Ah, you are tall yourself," cooed Mrs. Dering.

"I would give worlds if I were. I admire tall women *immensely*, but John says men don't. They all adore the little ones—just tall enough to reach their hearts."

"What are you all discussing?" asked Jack, strolling up with a man, whom he introduced to Dolly as Captain Lennox.

"I'll give you three guesses."

"Your neighbour's sins?"

"We were discussing 'Lovely Woman.'"

"What did I tell you?"

"No, not her sins, only the relative merits of the tall woman against the short," Dolly explained. "Mrs. Dering has just told us that her husband declares '*no* man admires a tall woman'!"

"The little women rule the world," Captain Lennox averred.

"With all due respect to you and Major Dering, I beg to differ," said Jack. "Personally, I admire a tall, graceful girl, with a beautiful figure, and a bright intelligent face, more than a short one, however pretty."

"But don't you think the small women have pretty figures?" Mrs. Dering argued.

"There are brilliant exceptions of course, dear lady. But, as a rule, short women are not noted for their figures—they haven't enough

canvas to go on for long graceful lines and sweeping curves."

"You evidently don't admire the pocket Venus," laughed Lennox.

"I do—but not to the exclusion of every other type."

"You must be hoarse, Jack, after these arguments. Come and get me some tea," Dolly commanded. "Who are the players?" as they passed the tennis courts.

"That sparkling little lady, playing with de Plastron, is Miss Vereker, who is 'Peep Bo.' She is a clever girl, and will do it splendidly. They got up *La Cigale* last time, and she sang in the chorus, showing such aptitude that now she is promoted to a part. The other lady is Mrs. Haughton, and the man with her is Kenneth M'Taggart (the 'Mikado'). He did the 'Duke' in *La Cigale*, and 'D. P.' says they were all convulsed over his strong accent, that—on a would-be skittishly inclined Duke—must have been excruciatingly funny."

"What a pity I missed it!"

"Well, if you *will* leave your friends to voyage to your lonely island in the Pacific."

"Be quiet, Jack! Not another word!"

He laughed. "That's what M'Taggart said when he was the Duke. 'D. P.' imitated him

saying 'Not a wurr—rd to the Duch—*ess*'—and I can only say if it was like that, it must have brought down the house!"

"What a droll person! Who are those two pretty girls with a lady in black?"

"Those are the Misses Carey, generally called 'Mother Carey's chickens'; they come from Madras, and are staying with the Collector. He is in love with Miss Lulu, and we expect to hear of the engagement any moment."

"How exciting! By the way, I wonder if Mildred has a copy of *The Mikado* score? It seems only the other day that we played in it."

"It seems longer than that to me. I'll lend you mine—we can practise it together. Perhaps you don't know that I'm 'Ko-Ko' once more, and our engagement will soon be given out officially!"

"Only on the stage, though!" she reminded him. "Besides, you forget I'm in love with 'Nanki Poo.'"

"Are you two ready to come home?" asked Mildred, coming up. "I've been having a little talk with Mrs. Dering, and I laughed so much I'm quite exhausted. She always amuses me, and I love to draw her out. She is very busy with Captain Lennox at present. 'So nice to have a faithful friend to cheer me

up when John is away,' she told me. 'She couldn't bear her lonely life if it wasn't for Captain Lennox, who came every day to take her out for drives. It was what she called *real* philanthropy.'"

The short-lived Indian dusk was fading into night, a vivid glow of deepest rose painted the horizon as they drove homewards.

"Well, dear, d'you think you'll like Purdahpur as well as Belgaum?" asked Mildred.

"I think it's charming, and such a pretty place!"

"The Careys are two nice girls," said Mildred, "I'll ask them over on Sunday to meet you," as they stopped under the porch. "Run away, child, you've only got a quarter of an hour!"

Ward had laid out the pretty pale blue ninon frock. Irama Ayah had hot water waiting when Dolly flew into the room. Her maid swiftly arranged the dark waves of her hair, hooked up the bodice, handed her a fan, and drew aside the curtains leading to the drawing-room.

The Colonel was the only occupant of the pretty room, with its pictures and curios, the comfy chairs and sofas, and the pink-shaded lamps.

"Good girl," rising from the sofa, where he had

been having a game with Snow. "Here's Mildred; we won't wait for Jack."

"I hope you've brought your habit," said her sister, as they drank their coffee in the verandah. "Akbar would carry you splendidly, and you could ride to early parade with Geoffrey."

"I should love to."

"You might ride with me occasionally," Jack suggested.

Dolly laughed. "I'll see how you behave!"

The sunshine was pouring through the bamboo chicks when she woke next morning, to find Irama arranging chota hazri on the tea-poy beside her bed. She dressed herself leisurely, with Ward's help, and stepped out on the verandah, where the servants were laying the table for breakfast. Below, in the garden, the malis were watering the plants with brown earthenware chatties.

Blue pigeons walked daintily about the paths, or flew among the branches of the nim and gold mohur trees. Suddenly the clatter of hoofs was heard, and Geoffrey rode into the porch on a handsome brown Waler, followed by Jack.

"Boy! breakfast bringing," Geoffrey called, as he dismounted, and, giving the reins to the syce, came clanking up the verandah to greet

Dolly, looking fresh and winsome in her white frock.

"Hope you slept well?" he said. "Jack and I have been inspecting the cantonment rations. What do you think of Sitabhai?"

"She's a beauty!"

"Yes, she's a nice animal—a compatriot of yours, of course."

"What's the name of that tree with the dark brown nuts?" inquired Dolly, after breakfast.

"Those are 'Promotion Nuts,'" Jack explained. "The I.C.S. call them that, because they're extraordinarily unhealthy for Europeans; and, of course, if the head of a department succumbed, after eating them, the next man was promoted."

"How dreadful! When does the mail go out? I ought to write some letters."

"At three o'clock," said Geoffrey. "You'll find paper and ink on that table in the corner. I must be off now. Can you amuse yourself till Mildred comes down?"

"I had better take charge of her till then," Jack said. "It won't do to let her mope, you know."

"The only thing I don't like about India," Dolly averred, "is the unblushing manner in which the whole household, from the khansamah to the ayah, discuss our every word and move-

ment, our personal affairs, even our flirtations, with their friends in the bazaar. I got a horrid shock when I first discovered this. It seems such incredible curiosity ! "

" Isn't it ? But the fact remains they take the most vital interest in our goings and comings. I was staying with a newly married couple for the week-end, not long ago ; they always addressed each other in the most affectionate terms, which was, of course, remarked on freely in the cook-house and bazaar. One morning, as I was shaving, I actually overheard the ayah and the mati-boy discussing the subject in the back verandah. ' Always " darling," " loving," calling,' the ayah said scornfully, in conclusion ; then, after a pause, ' " Duck," *too*, sometimes calling ! ' "

" Capital ! " said Dolly, laughing. " You ought to send that story to the *Pioneer* ! "

CHAPTER XXII

"THERE'S nothing like country life!" declared Mary. "I often wonder why we live in town!"

"You don't live here always, my dear," said Mrs. Barrington.

"I could never grow tired of it!"

They had just returned from a visit to the stockyard to see some young horses, which had just been brought in from the back station.

Navarre, a small black girl, now brought in the tray of "eleven o'clock." Boy, who was playing horses at a little distance, attracted by the plate of "brownie," dragged his fiery steed a little closer, and patiently awaited the course of events.

Suddenly he pricked up his ears, and uttering a cry of "Paddy's coming—I see Paddy with the mail-bag," ran off round the corner of the verandah.

"Boy is very excited when the mail comes," his mother observed. "Paddy generally brings

him a bag of sweeties from Wongadilla. We only get the mail on Wednesdays and Sundays, so we look forward to it all the rest of the week."

As she spoke the three men made their appearance.

"May I give you a cup of tea, Mr. Hammond?" asked the hostess; "or do you disapprove of it?"

He smiled. "Speaking as an old bushman, I can assure you, dear lady, that tea *never* comes amiss to me. I can drink it at any hour—under any circumstances—and I most emphatically declare it to be, in my opinion, the healthiest and most invigorating drink a man can take in this climate."

"Hear, hear!" echoed Uncle Joe heartily. "That is my own opinion. Alas! owing to an enfeebled constitution, I am reluctantly obliged to vary it with a little whisky occasionally—medicinally, of course!"

Mr. Barrington sorted the letters and handed one to his wife.

"This is a pleasant surprise," she said, looking up from it. "We are to have more visitors, Denis. Mrs. Bolton writes that she and her husband will be here at lunch-time, and will stay till Saturday, if convenient."

"Splendid!" he rejoined. "You will like

her, Miss Hammond. She is a charming American, and he is one of the best. They haven't been married long, but she has taken to bush life most kindly."

"I must go and see about the rooms, and interview the cook," said Mrs. Barrington.

"Do let me help you get the rooms ready," begged Mary. "Couldn't I do that, while you inspect the larder?"

They returned, to see the visitors drive up in a middle-aged Abbott buggy, drawn by a smart pair of greys. Combo appeared at the horses' heads, and Mr. Bolton, throwing him the reins, got down to help his wife. The American bride sprang lightly to the ground, and went to meet her hostess.

"Welcome to Munyandi, Mrs. Bolton."

"I'm delighted to see you," said the latter.

"I was tired of waiting," said the little lady, "so I told Bill, if he wouldn't bring me, I'd go by myself."

"I've been promising to bring her for the last fortnight," her husband explained; "but I've been so busy. This is the first chance I've had."

"We're always glad to see you, Bill," Denis Barrington assured him. "But come in; I want you to meet Mr. Hammond and his daughter."

The American, attired in a perfectly fitting coat and skirt, had dressed the part with accuracy and good taste.

Without being exactly pretty, her hazel eyes had an alertness of expression, which reminded Mary of a bright-eyed bird.

"Would you like to come to your room, or will you rest here?" Mrs. Barrington asked.

"Thank you, I think I'll just stay right here," seating herself beside Uncle Joe, who rose to the occasion, and, drawing his chair closer to hers, embarked on a lively conversation.

"You are old frends, I see."

"Well, rather! I think I was Mrs. Bolton's first caller."

"Why, certainly! Wasn't I on my knees, trying to unpack a great trunkful of wedding presents, all by myself, when Bill was out. And didn't you come to my rescue, and unearth that big Sheffield plate urn!"

"You did yeoman's service, evidently!"

"Of course I did—why—I——"

"Uncle Joe, Mr. Barnes wants to speak to you at the telephone," announced Barrington.

"Don't stay too long," said the lady of the house. "Lunch is coming in."

"You can't say I've been long *this* time!" he declared, coming in quite five minutes after the

rest of the party were seated, and ensconcing himself between Mary and Mrs. Barrington.

"It's no use arguing with you," affirmed the latter. "I must let you off this time."

"Don't be hard on me," begged the sinner, making eyes at her in the most unblushing manner. "How did you learn to manage Denis?"

Mrs. Barrington laughed. "I've got three married sisters, and I was the last to marry! You wouldn't believe how much I learnt from watching their methods."

"I wonder I ever persuaded her to take me," Denis remarked, "when I think of the band of admirers who followed in her train."

"She evidently didn't agree with the lady in *The Mountebanks* who avers that 'one lover in the hand is worth two husbands in the bush,'" said Uncle Joe. "Ah! when I think of all the charming girls I made love to in my younger days, I wonder I ever allowed myself to be led to the altar! Of course, I can't expect *you* to agree with these views, Mrs. Bolton. I expect you've got Bill properly under the whip, like all American wives."

"Why, of course!" she retorted. "America is the only country in the world where men are kept in their proper place. We never pamper them.

They have to wait on us, take us out for rides and picnics, and bring us flowers and candy for quite a while before we make up our minds whether they are worth keeping."

"Till then they are merely samples on approval?" asked Barrington slyly.

"Exactly."

Uncle Joe rose from his chair. "This is no place for me," he remarked. "I decline to hear our sex alluded to in such terms. I am sure Mr. Hammond is dying for his pipe. To the smoke-room, gentlemen—forward, march!"

"It's a pity the American method isn't practised here," said the hostess, leading the way to the verandah, and drawing up a cane rocking-chair for Mrs. Bolton.

"This is like the American farmhouses," said the bride. "They always say, 'Come right in—take the rock-*er*.'"

"Delightful!"

"What did you say about the American method?" asked Mary.

"Only that I wish it obtained here; the effect on the gilded youth would be most salutary. I've tried to instil my views into Denis."

"With the most favourable results."

"But, seriously, before I was married I saw so many men who took no earthly notice of their

wives before people, and never had time to pay them any of the little attentions they besieged them with before marriage . . . "

"Do go on."

"So, after we had been engaged a few months, I drew up a list of things, and got him to sign it."

"That's our way of doing business," said the American.

"Yes. Well, one of the things Denis had to do was to tell me once a week 'that he loved me.' (Not that I doubted it for a moment, but still, I like to be reminded occasionally.) Also, he was not to treat me as a stranger before people, but to refer to me in conversation, showing that he had faith in my opinion. Lastly, he was to let it be fairly obvious that he thought a good deal of me—and didn't mind the rest of the world knowing it."

"Quite right! Are those the tactics you adopt, Mrs. Bolton?"

The bride smiled. "Mrs. Barrington is very sensible. Now, the English women spoil their husbands so; they let them see they think they're superior to every other created male, that the men get so—they kind of believe it. Our way is quite different——"

"And that is?"

"Always keep them guessing," she retorted.

"Some women run to meet their man every

time he enters the house. I never do anything so paltry. When my husband comes home, I'm not hanging out of the window watching for him. Not at all! He hasn't a notion where I've removed to. He has to wander around, looking in every corner, till he finds me—and that's so good for a man."

"That seems very sound. I was going to say that, on the other hand, I display an intelligent interest in all his hobbies. I read the paper regularly, and we discuss the politics of the day. If I don't understand any particular subject he is keen on, I make a point of studying it."

"Admirable!" said Mary. "Go on."

"When he comes home tired, I don't greet him with the news that Boy is developing whooping-cough! If anything disagreeable has to be told, I wait till he has finished his coffee, and had a peaceful smoke after dinner, then I take advantage of the mellow, at-peace-with-all-mankind mood which sets in about then, and break it to him ve-ry gently."

"Those are the lines *I* work on," said the American.

"I took some cooking lessons, while I was engaged," Mrs. Barrington went on, "and having discovered that Denis, like myself, had a weakness for savouries, I made a study of them."

"How clever of you!" Mary observed. "Every girl should know how to cook—especially savouries."

"What course do you pursue if things go wrong?" asked the bride.

"It very rarely happens. I always take great care to instruct the cook in the way we like things done."

"But if it should?"

"Then the only way is to get in *first*! Denis hates the least suspicion of butter in the breakfast dishes. Well, if a new cook happens to err, I meet him at the dining-room door with an air of the deepest penitence, and say sweetly, 'I'm *so* sorry, dear, but I'm afraid Jane has done so and so. I thought I had explained it to her most carefully—but I suppose I didn't make it sufficiently clear.' (I give him a kiss here—if I think the occasion warrants it.) Then I say, 'I hope it won't spoil your breakfast, dear?' This disarms him completely; there is nothing left but to forgive me—feeling a noble creature all the time. Men do love to think they are ruling you with a firm hand," said Mrs. Barrington.

"A little tact is all that is necessary?"

"Certainly. Given tact, an ounce of diplomacy, and about a quarter of a pound of judicious flattery—applied at the right moment—any

woman can lead her husband by a string—provided he is really fond of her. If he wants you to do something you don't propose to do, never *say* you won't do it—that destroys harmony in the home. Just don't do it. Let him hold forth on the plan of action he intends you to adopt, then, when he has exhausted all his arguments, say very quietly, 'Would you like me to tell you what I thought of doing?' Proceed very carefully, with the utmost tact, to dispose of all his suggestions but one, which you carefully place in a prominent position, add a little flattery before submitting your own scheme, and you will have convinced him that the entire course of action was thought out by him. He will also congratulate himself on the masterly way in which he has 'moulded' you. But, how funny, here we are discussing matrimony like a trio of little schoolgirls!"

. . . . . .

"What a tremendous flow of water!" said Mary. They had all walked to the bottom of the big paddock to inspect the artesian well. She looked with astonishment at the broad crystal stream welling up out of the ground, from whence it was instantly diverted into what looked like a gigantic iron elbow.

"Does that go on always?"

"It does, day and night, without ceasing," Barrington told her. "It flows through this elbow, as you see, and from that into a channel leading to the creek. It feeds the said creek winter and summer, so that it is never dry. There are several of these wells on Munyandi, but this is perhaps the finest specimen."

"I'm delighted to have seen one. I've often wondered what they were like."

"Don't you think they are very wonderful?" asked her father.

"I do indeed—and wonderfully useful, too."

"I should think they were!" Uncle Joe exclaimed. "These artesian wells have been the saving of Queensland. I have a couple of sub-artesian ones at Bullenbong. I work one myself with a steam-pump. It's my last new toy, and I find it most enthralling."

"South Africa is the place for water-springs," said Mrs. Bolton. "I have a married sister in Johannesburg, who declares that the Victoria Falls in Rhodesia are finer than Niagara! I must go around and visit Mamie next year—just to find out if that's so."

"It would be a delightful trip," Uncle Joe said. "I've often intended to go there myself, and take a tour round the battlefields. Suppose I come in your boat?"

"She's not going just yet," Bolton laughed; "seeing I only collected her a few months ago."

"He thinks I'm going to stay home for quite a while," his wife remarked; "but I guess I'll have a restless fit next year."

"You'd better not leave me," said her husband. "Some one else might want to annex me."

"I never thought of that. Another 'Ann-Eliza' might come along."

"Who is Ann-Eliza?" asked Mary.

"Ann-Eliza was Brigham Young's nineteenth wife. She used to be called 'No. 19,'" Mrs. Bolton explained. "When Brigham died, she had to get a living somehow, so she travelled around lecturing on Temperance."

"*On Temperance!* What made her think of that?"

"Well, she had to make money some way. She would have taken up dressmaking if she could have made it pay. But she was a fine, handsome woman, and she got on well at the lecturing, drawing big houses wherever she went. When she got to Michigan, some wealthy people named Barker, who had a lovely home in one of the towns, took a fancy to her. They put her up all the time she was there, and showed her every kindness."

"And how did she behave?" asked Uncle Joe.

"Behave!" wrathfully. "That's exactly what she didn't do! She made herself so agreeable to the master of the house that he succumbed to her fascinations. Shortly after her departure, he instituted proceedings for divorcing his wife, and when they were completed he married 'Ann-Eliza.' Now the poor wife is keeping a boarding-house in Boston, while 'No. 19,' having ousted her from her home, has taken her place. Did you ever know such nerve?"

"What a horrid woman!" exclaimed Mrs. Barrington. "She doesn't deserve to be happy."

"So the other inhabitants thought. They promptly boycotted her, and she is always known as 'No. 19.'"

. . . . . .

"Would you like to have a look at the shearing?" Barrington asked Mary at breakfast.

"I should love to. It would be like old times at Buckaminjah."

"It would be rather nice, Denis," said his wife.

"Very well; I'll drive you all down in the drag. Bill has to go back, so we can escort them part of the way. I shall be ready at nine o'clock."

"I'm going too, muvver," Boy announced.

"So you shall. Go and tell Navarre to wash your face, and get your coat and cap."

Punctually at nine Mary and Mrs. Bolton were at the gate, where Denis had brought up the four-in-hand with a magnificent curve. Uncle Joe and Mr. Hammond were already on board. Mrs. Barrington appeared, followed by Boy at top-speed, pursued in his turn by Navarre with the coat he had refused to wait for.

"All aboard?" said the charioteer, when Mary had climbed up beside him, Mrs. Barrington preferring to remain below with her male visitors. "One moment," said Uncle Joe, assisting Mrs. Bolton into her seat and skipping back into his own place.

"What a fine team!" Mary remarked, as the leaders went off with a bound. "What are their names?"

"Baronet and Boulder, Barmecide and Battleaxe," he told her. "They're pretty fresh just now. I bred them myself, so I'm glad you like them."

"They do you great credit. I love being on the box of a really good four-in-hand. There's nothing more stimulating!"

"Except hunting," Barrington reminded her. "A good run, taking your fences at top-speed, one after the other, with your favourite horse going strong under you. Oh, there's nothing in the world to compare with *that* feeling!"

"Perhaps you are right. It is rather thrilling, isn't it? Bee and I used to do a little in that line, but father put a stop to it a year ago. He won't let us jump anything higher than a log."

"There's a certain amount of danger in it. But why did your father stop you?"

"He took me to a country show about that time, and we saw a poor girl *killed* there! I shall never forget it. She was a splendid rider, and had been jumping in the ladies' contest. Another girl was running her very close for the prize. At last she took her horse at the highest part of the wings and sailed over it like a bird. Just after this she dropped her whip, and, bending down to pick it up, overbalanced herself and hung for a moment; her horse—a nervous-looking chestnut—took fright and bolted suddenly across the course, dashing her head against a post on the way. Poor girl! She was killed on the spot, right in front of the stand. It was a ghastly sight; I shall remember the horror of it to my dying day. From that day they have never allowed girls to jump at that show."

"Poor soul! I don't wonder at your father, after that."

"I want to come up in front," said Boy. "I can't see down here, farver."

Mary looked round. "So you shall. Come up here; you can sit in the middle and see everything."

The child's face beamed. Uncle Joe lifted him up, and he was soon seated between them.

"I see a wild turkey," he said presently. "Just over there."

"Boy is quite right," Uncle Joe declared. "Why didn't I bring my gun? We might have had him for dinner."

Mary was having a lesson in steering the four-in-hand, which she found most enthralling. Denis, having selected a good piece of road, gave the reins into her hands, and was astonished at the way in which she handled them.

"I drove a team once for twenty miles," she told him; "from Bungelbone to Wanningbar. But I confess they didn't pull like these horses. Still, I learnt how to hold the reins, so as to control the leaders and wheelers at will, and it has been useful to me once or twice since."

"What is that large tent, Denis?" asked his wife, as he pulled up in front of the cottage in which the wool-classer, the book-keeper, and other officials had their meals during shearing.

"I don't know. Looks like a travelling circus. I wish they would keep away."

A black boy appeared, and with his help Mr.

Barrington took out the horses. The Boltons said good-bye, and drove off, while the others walked up to the wool-shed.

Here a busy scene awaited them. The whirring noise of seventy-five shearing machines filled the air, while the small tramways were kept incessantly going with baskets of fleeces up to the tables over which the wool-classer held sway.

Tar-boys and "rouseabouts" moved up and down among the ranks unceasingly—the former in response to the cry of "tar," when some shearer had inadvertently snipped off a piece of skin along with the wool; the latter ever and anon sweeping up small bits of greasy wool and removing them.

"How funny the sheep look with those ridges the machines leave on their bodies!" said Mary.

"The book-keeper had his hair cut by one of the machines once, and it all came out in ridges like the sheep. Denis and I nearly expired with laughter when we saw him," said Mrs. Barrington.

"We did something funnier than that at my old station," observed Uncle Joe. "We wanted to get a horse ready for the show. There were no clippers handy, and we were in a great hurry, so we just put him up on one of the stands in the wool-shed and shore him with one of the machines.

We had to go over some of the ridges afterwards with a shears, but, on the whole, they didn't make a bad job of it."

"Lovely!" smiled Mrs. Barrington. "Come and look at the wool-press," leading the way to a room on the right, where the bins, filled to overflowing with a mountain of fleeces, divided into various grades of excellence, stood ready to cast into the gaping mouths of the press which yawned unceasingly, refusing to be satisfied, in spite of being fed every moment by the tireless workers. These last emptied them into the giant maw, which went on continuously disgorging them at the other end—packed, branded, and ready for the wool-drays, already waiting to be loaded, outside the shed.

Suddenly a whistle sounded, and all work was suspended. It was the signal for "eleven o'clock," when the shearer, the tar-boy, the "rouseabout," and others adjourn to partake of tea and "brownie."

"You see, we treat them well, Miss Hammond," Denis remarked. "Come along; we will have ours at the cottage."

"Tea is just coming in," Nelly assured them, so Mrs. Barrington and Mary seated themselves on a rough hammock in the verandah.

Suddenly a strange apparition presented itself.

From the large tent issued the figure of a woman, advancing with an air of would-be dignity towards the little group. As she came closer, they saw that she was clad in a tight-fitting yellow dress. With this she wore long black gloves; her hair was arranged in puffs, while a large red hat surmounted a decidedly enhanced complexion.

This dazzling vision moved slowly, halting as she reached Mr. Barrington. He went to meet her, when she addressed him in beseeching tones. He hesitated, then told her to follow him into a small building utilised as an office.

"Wants him to allow their circus to perform to-night," said Uncle Joe.

"The tea is in, ma'am," Nelly announced.

"I could fancy myself back at Buckaminjah," Mary declared, as they sat round the table partaking of tea, in white enamelled tin cups, and slices of buttered "brownie." "Bee and I always did this when we visited the wool-shed."

"Give me some tea, lass. I'm exhausted after dealing with the circus-lady," said Barrington, who now came in.

"What did she want?"

"Oh, to perform here to-night, and I object to that kind of thing when shearing is going on. I put this before her very politely, but she begged

me to reconsider it, assuring me that ' it was a very high-class show, conducted under her personal supervision,' etc."

" And what did you say ? "

" I—oh ! well—er—on consideration, I consented, ' for one night only,' so she thanked me and departed."

" I knew she'd get round you," Uncle Joe chuckled. " You Irishmen are all alike. You're a soft-hearted race; none of you can refuse a request from a woman. If she works on your feelings, she is sure to get her petition granted in the end."

CHAPTER XXIII

"REALLY, life grows more exasperating every day!" Dolly thought. "Why is it that, just as everything pointed to a cheerful time, one thing after another goes wrong?"

She was taking the usual siesta after tiffin, but her mind was too agitated to allow her to sleep.

As a matter of fact, Jack's unexpected behaviour was partly the cause of these disturbed feelings. It was true he rode with her daily before breakfast, drove her out constantly in the cart, practised *The Mikado* music with her, and spent much of his time in her society; still, Dolly was not satisfied. His whole manner to her had undergone an indefinable change. No longer her devoted slave, ready to dance attendance upon her at any hour of the day or acquiesce with her lightest whim, their intercourse had resolved itself into the intimacy of an elder brother to his favourite sister. This was very nice, as far as it went; but it was not at all what Mrs. Vane had anticipated. And it must be confessed

that she did not in the least enjoy his sudden and unlooked-for change of front. He had also developed an irritating independence of movement with regard to himself. Only yesterday, at the Club, he had gone so far as to spend most of the afternoon playing Badminton with Mrs. Fanshawe, the dashing grass-widow from Coonoor.

On top of this defection, an impassioned epistle had just come from Dick, telling her that, owing to Mary having broken off the engagement, he was now free to devote his life to her. Mr Halkett had finally granted his request for three months' leave, and he was busy arranging to start that day three weeks for India, where they could be married from her sister's house, and, after a honeymoon spent in Kashmir, return to Collaroi, where that blissful future they had so often talked of awaited them.

To Dolly's already overwrought mind this announcement seemed the culminating point of irritation. She had known for the last fortnight that Jack was the only man she really cared for. That flirtation with Dick was merely a flash in the pan, born of propinquity and the flattery of her insatiable vanity.

"Why did I ever go there?" she asked herself, tearing up Dick's letter.

Another and more serious aspect of the hopeless

tangle of her affairs suddenly presented itself. To-morrow would be the day he was to sail from Melbourne in the *Ortona*. Something must be done to stop him—and at once—this very afternoon—or it would be too late.

Oh, horrors! Suppose he were to arrive here and confront Jack with the news of their engagement! That must be averted at any cost. She would cable to stop him, and send Ward off to the Post Office with it this very moment. She got up hastily, and, after spoiling several telegraph forms, finally wrote—

"Do not come. Writing.—VANE."

Ward appeared, and, having had the cable explained, was soon speeding down the drive in Mildred's rickshaw.

Dolly tried to collect her scattered thoughts. "Thank goodness, that's over!" she thought. "I'm glad I addressed it to Scott's Hotel, otherwise it might have missed him. What on earth *should* I do if he arrived? Imagine me stagnating for years at that dull place! Now that I am back in my old life, I realise that it would have become unendurable in a month or two. After that I should have been bored to tears."

. . . . . .

"Jack, you are incorrigible! I won't hear another word!"

"You don't mean that?"

"Yes, I do. Make Lorelei hurry herself; we shall be dreadfully late. Remember, I've got to get into my fancy dress, and so have you. I sent the powder to your room."

"By Jove! I'd forgotten about it," laying the whip on the pony's neck.

Dolly had regained her usual spirits. Already the events of the morning were far away—pushed out of sight for ever, she hoped. Jack was driving her home from the Club, and they had been laughing over Belgaum reminiscences as light-heartedly as two children.

"Mind you put on plenty of powder," she advised, as they separated at the door.

"You'd better come and do it for me," he retorted wickedly.

. . . . . .

"I wish these people would come," Mildred said anxiously. "Geoffrey, go and see if Jack is ready. Perhaps he's waiting for you to powder the back of his head."

"You'd better look up Dolly."

Mildred walked to the big mirror to survey herself. Her shimmering skirts of gold-embroidered gauze, the great golden butterfly in her hair, suited her brilliant colouring to perfection.

"Why, here's the comet!" She turned to see Jack in a particularly becoming Court dress. His hair was powdered liberally in front, but rather sparsely behind, the supply having evidently run out.

"Your dress is very like Dolly's. How nice you look!"

"Are you a French Marquis?"

"On the contrary. I am the last French Governor of Quebec. Glad you like my kit."

"Tell me if you are the comet. You won't blow us up before dinner, will you?"

"Nonsense! D'you like it?"

"Of course! I see it now—'The Golden Butterfly.' Can you lend me some powder? Mine ran out," exhibiting the back of his head.

"I'll get you some more." She got a powder-puff and put the required touches to his *coiffure*.

Geoffrey returned with Mrs. Fanshawe attired in short, pink tulle skirts, a gigantic pink poppy on her head. Captain Lennox followed in the garb of Harlequin.

"*So* sorry to be late," she declared. "If I had known Captain Lennox was coming, I'd have begged him to drive me."

"Why didn't you?"

"But you *ought* to have come with Harlequin. Aren't you Columbine?" asked Geoffrey.

"Nothing of the sort. I am a pink poppy. But may I ask if you are the Sultan of Turkey?"

"No. The truth is, I am fed-up of uniforms," he replied, "so I got into my evening clothes and unearthed a fez somewhere. I blackened my moustache, and am now Hobart Pasha."

"It's most becoming!" "Flirting Fanny" assured him.

Geoffrey, who was always open to flattery, bent towards her, and was about to utter something complimentary, when he was arrested by his wife's voice.

"We won't wait for Dolly. Will you take in Mrs. Fanshawe?"

The Colonel offered her his arm.

"Am I so late?" said a voice. He turned to behold a Court lady of the time of Louis the Sixteenth, her trained gown of blue and silver brocade adding grace and dignity to the slight figure, the powdered hair turned back over a cushion, the mischievous grey eyes and dimpled chin accentuated by cunningly placed patches.

"Why, Dolly, I'd no idea you were so pretty!"

"Madame la Marquise de Merveille, at your service," she smiled, sweeping a courtesy. "I'm delighted that you approve of me."

"Mrs. Vane, I believe I'm to take you in," said Captain Lennox.

"Let us go at once. What made you think of Harlequin? I shouldn't have known you, but for your voice."

"Another of your friends has gone as a clown. Guess who it is?"

"I'll wait till I see him. I love surprises. Have you any big game about here?" she demanded presently. "I should love to see a tiger-hunt."

"Well, we might find you one," her partner replied. "Our Government offers Rs. 75 for a man-eater."

"Really? Mildred, do you hear that? Can't we get up a party and have a hunt?"

"I don't think you'd care much about it. You would have to sit up in a machan with one of the shikaris for three or four hours, keeping perfectly silent for fear of the tiger hearing you."

"What a ripping idea!" Jack exclaimed. "Mrs. Fanshawe, will you keep me company in my machan?"

"Fetching Fanny" gave him a responsive glance. "Delighted!" she said.

"Let's arrange the party at once," Jack went on. "Gad! I'll never forget the last tiger-hunt I assisted at. It was in the Central Provinces. We had a big camp—about ten couples of men

and girls and a very sporting grass-widow. She afterwards quarrelled desperately with her hostess, because she complained that 'she had been put up in the machan with the wrong man'!"

"Poor lady!" said Dolly. "That must have been hard to bear."

As they left the table Geoffrey looked at his watch. "By Jove! we must hurry," he said.

Mrs. Vane was the first to reach the porch, where Captain Lennox stood waiting. "Do let me drive you?" he asked eagerly. "I've got a corking pony!"

Yes, she *would* go. Jack wanted a lesson for making that absurd fuss over "Flirting Fanny." "I shall be charmed. Do let us start, or we shall miss the first dance."

He threw on his overcoat, and got entangled with the sleeve.

Dolly came to his assistance. As she did so, Jack and Mrs. Fanshawe arrived together. The former, grasping the situation at a glance, assisted "Flirting Fanny" into the gharry and, getting in beside her, drove off.

CHAPTER XXIV

"WHEN does Mary come back?" asked Peter.

"In about ten days," Bee told him.

Peter relapsed into a brown study, puffing away in silence for a few moments; then he said slowly, "Bee, I want you to tell me about Mary. Did it—cut her up very much—when—she broke off her engagement?"

"I'm afraid it did," she replied seriously. "She was devoted to Dick, though I never thought he was worthy of her."

"Neither did I," said Peter.

"She has been very brave over it. Her pride came to the rescue, and I think she is getting over it gradually. The complete change of scene and environment has done her good in spite of herself."

"You really think she *is* beginning to get over it?"

"Yes, I do; the tone of her last letter was decidedly more cheerful. You see, travelling about the country with father, she has been

obliged to exert herself to be agreeable to the people whose hospitality they have accepted, and that has been good for her."

"Poor little soul! I hate to think of her feeling miserable. She is such a bright, sunshiny mortal, and that brand of temperament is worth a hundred a year to its owner."

"So it is. But she is a plucky child, and too sensible to let this affair spoil her life."

"I would give all the world to try and comfort her, if she would only let me." He got up, and, walking to the door, stood looking out on the blue sea and the white-winged yachts. Presently he came back. "Do you think there is any hope for me?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

Peter looked earnestly in her face. "I mean," he said, "that I have loved Mary for the last three months; but she was engaged to Upton then, and it was hopeless. Do you think she would listen to me now, if I asked her?"

"Poor boy! I never suspected it; you were always teazing each other. Still, I know Mary is very fond of you."

"Don't—*don't* say that, Bee; it's the worst sign."

"Not at all. My advice to you is frankly this. Go and try your luck. When she comes

back, just ask her the first time you are alone. If I can help you in any way, I will."

"Thank you. You're a real sound pal. I *did* ask her, some weeks ago, when it became evident to me that the widow was doing her best to entrap Upton. The child is so innocent; it never seems to have occurred to her."

"Mary is always like that, if she really cares for any one. She trusts them implicitly. Did you really ask her?"

"Yes, I did. I tried to let her see what I saw, but, of course, she scoffed at it. Upton was absolutely infallible in her eyes. As to his allowing himself to be led into flirtation by any one, it was impossible."

"What did you say?"

"I told her that 'a little widow is a dangerous thing,' that I had had frequent experience of the cult in India, and that men were only human after all. Mind you, if an attractive woman is staying in the same house with a man for a month or two, and she makes a dead set at him day after day, it is very hard for him to escape her fascinations."

"Dick professed to be so desperately in love with Mary that I don't know how the widow managed to capture him," said Bee.

"Their methods are so daring, and they leave

no stone unturned to captivate the person they have marked as their own for the moment."

"I was thankful Mary had the sense to put an end to it. Dick didn't deserve her devotion."

"Poor devil, I'm sorry for him too. He will regret it before he is done with the widow. I don't suppose she cared a button for him really. However, I asked Mary if Upton came and told her, in so many words, that he loved Mrs. Vane, would she marry me?"

"You did?"

"Well, she was so confident that such a thing couldn't happen, that she consented, but only on that condition."

"In that case, I should say your path was comparatively clear. She has broken it off with Dick."

"No," gloomily, "that's not the point. You see, she said, 'If Dick comes and tells me that he loves Mrs. Vane, I'll marry you'; but he didn't. She broke it off herself, and sent back his ring."

"She was so devoted to Dick, I don't know how she did it. Still, if she told you that, I see no reason for you to despair. Besides, as I said before, I know she looks upon you as a trusted friend."

"You really think so?"

"I know it. We are all fond of you. I

should be delighted if she would let you make her happy again."

"I should ask nothing more than to devote the rest of my life to it," Peter declared.

Bee looked at his earnest face, and the tears came into her eyes. "You dear soul," she said, "I only hope you may be successful. But take my advice—be patient, take her gently, then by degrees persuade her to listen to you again; and, if you exercise your usual diplomacy, I believe you will win her in the end."

"Bless you, Bee! I hope and pray you may be right, though I know I'm not worthy of her, and never shall be. Anyhow, I'll do my best to follow your instructions."

CHAPTER XXV

"By Jove, I'm drenched to the skin!" Dick exclaimed, as he got out of the buggy. "Not that I ought to grumble; we want the rain badly enough."

He had just come home, having been out all day, and the said rain was still pouring steadily.

"Come in and change your wet things, Mr. Upton," Elizabeth commanded, meeting him at the door. "I'll have the tea in by the time you are ready."

"I think I'll have a drink first, in case of accidents." He went into the dining-room, and, going to the sideboard, poured himself out a glass of whisky and water.

The temperature had dropped considerably, and Elizabeth had made a tiny fire.

This was the sort of day of which he and Mary had so often talked, when they used to discuss the happy life they were to spend together. Mary was to hide behind the door, and he was to be tremendously surprised when she flew out

to give him a warm welcome ; then he would link his arm in hers and take her with him, while he went to get dry things. Then they would come back to the cosy sitting-room, and she would pour out his tea, sitting on the arm of his chair while he drank it, telling him what she had been doing all day. How hopefully they had both looked forward to the future ! Dick sighed as he thought of those dreams. They were parted now. Another image filled his mind, to the exclusion of all else.

What was Dolly doing, he wondered ? Would she meet him with a smile when he came home tired, pour out his tea, and " mother " him in all those dear, human ways as Mary had looked forward to doing ? He smiled as he thought that he would probably be waiting on her, attending to her every whim, and spoiling her badly. In a very few weeks now they would be together. To-morrow Halkett was to arrive ; the day after he was to start for Melbourne, leaving a few hours later for India. Once there, they would be married at once, and away for that honeymoon in Kashmir of which they had so often talked. Then the voyage home together, and, best of all, the life here, which was to be such a paradise for them both.

He lit his pipe and gazed thoughtfully into the fire, watching the blue wreaths of smoke twist

and curl. A drowsy feeling stole over him as he lay back in the old arm-chair, just tired enough to enjoy absolute freedom from mental effort.

A charred log fell with a crash and roused him. He woke with a start from those blissful dreams of Elysian fields in which he had been wandering hand in hand with Dolly.

As he did so, it occurred to him that he might as well open the mail-bag, which lay, still locked, on the table. He didn't expect anything interesting, there being no English mail-boats in. Turning the bag upside down, a pile of letters and papers fell out. As he sorted them, a telegram addressed to himself fell on the table. As he opened it, he uttered a forcible ejaculation, and, letting it drop through his fingers, sat staring blankly in front of him. After a moment he roused himself, picked it up once more, and read it through a second time. It was a cablegram, and ran thus—

"Do not come. Writing.—VANE."

He got up—his brain in a whirl, stunned for the moment by this bombshell—and, going to the sideboard, poured out a stiff glass of whisky, which he drank almost neat. Returning to the fire, he tried vainly to adjust his mental vision to the new outlook. What did it all mean? Was

he to blame for this tragic awakening from his dream—the crashing downfall of his fairy palace?

He took a photograph out of his pocket and looked at it earnestly, as if to wring from the smiling face the reason for its perfidy. It represented Dolly sitting on a low chair, in a white evening dress, her neck and arms, guiltless of jewels, rising in soft curves from the light froth of chiffon which outlined the square-cut bodice and tiny sleeves. One arched foot peeped from beneath the shimmering folds of the skirt. The dark hair, parted in the middle, lay in loose waves on either side of her forehead; the mischievous grey eyes seemed to look into his own.

It was Dolly who sat there and smiled at him, just as she had often done before.

"What had come between them, just as he was about to claim this treasure for his own?" Suddenly some words of Charley's came into his head, indicative of his disapproval when Dick had at last broken it to him about his changed feelings.

"You'll regret this, Dick!" he declared. "She doesn't really care a button about you. Any one can see what a flirt she is. The man she really loves is a soldier in India. Isabel told me all about it."

"Charley must have been right after all.

What an infernal fool I've been to let her make a plaything of me, just to amuse herself for the moment. It serves me right for being such a brute to Mary. She would never have treated me like this," he told himself remorsefully. His eye fell once more on the photograph. Moved by a sudden impulse, he took it up, and, tearing it savagely in half, tossed the pieces into the fire. "It can only mean one thing—she has thrown me over."

. . . . . .

"Hulloa, old chap! I see I'm just in time for tea," and the door opened to admit Charley Wharton, also rather wet. "Thank goodness, you've got a fire! It's quite cold," standing with his back to it. "I had to ride over to tell you the news. The governor has behaved like a brick. . . . I think I'll have a whisky first, and tell you afterwards."

Dick pulled himself together and produced the whisky, with a jug of water and a tumbler.

"Help yourself, old man, and go on with the story."

Charley poured himself out a liberal allowance of whisky, added the usual accompaniment, and went on—

"The old man has given his consent to our marriage, cabled me out a good-sized cheque for

expenses, and wants us to go home at once before we settle down. He promises to make me a really good allowance. I've cabled to Isabel that I'm sailing for India by the *Ortona* on Tuesday. We shall be fellow-passengers now. Isn't it luck?"

Dick tried to smile, but failed. "Rather! My best congratulations——" he began.

Charley turned and looked at him. "What's the matter with you, man? You look as if you had seen a ghost."

"I think I have," gloomily. "Read this," handing him the cable.

"What's all this?" glancing through it. "You don't mean to say that little devil has thrown you over after all?"

"It looks like it, doesn't it?"

"The heartless little hussy! I don't want to rub it in, Dick, but it is just what I always predicted."

"You did; but I couldn't bring myself to believe you."

"My dear boy, I saw through her from the start. She was very charming, but absolutely spoilt. She only came over here because she had had a fight with her best young man (over a flirtation too!), and was waiting for him to cool down."

Dick was silent.

"He wrote long letters to her nearly every mail," Charley continued. "I've watched her flush when they came—big grey envelopes with a regimental crest on the flap—and noticed the eager way in which she tore them open and read each sheet twice. A woman doesn't do that unless she takes an absorbing interest in the writer."

"No, I suppose not."

"I often wonder what Isabel saw in her. I've said so once or twice; but Isabel is so loyal, she wouldn't hear a word against her. Mrs. Vane is one of those women who can't be happy unless they occupy the front of the stage. Every other woman must be in the background, while she does the 'star' business. She knew about your engagement. I told her myself. It didn't matter if she destroyed Miss Hammond's happiness as long as she annexed you for the moment. Naturally, when she got back to India and her soldier friend, she had no further use for you. It's as simple as A B C."

"By Jove! I believe you're right. I can see it all now. It's a pity I was such an infatuated idiot that it didn't occur to me sooner. And to think I should have behaved like a blackguard to one of the best girls in the world for the sake of a good-for-nothing little flirt. I wish to Heaven I had never set eyes on her."

CHAPTER XXVI

Dolly looked after the departing couple with rage. Never mind! She would enjoy herself to-night in spite of him. Two could play at flirting.

She climbed up beside Captain Lennox, and during the drive to the Club used every wile and witchery in her power to tempt him to flirt. When they reached the porch, she had engaged herself to him for four waltzes and a lancers.

As they waited for Mildred, Mrs. Dering appeared. Her face hardened as she saw them. She came up with a sugared smile, and, after greeting Dolly, turned to Captain Lennox with an air of proprietorship, and, producing her programme, compared it with his. Her face was a study when she read its contents, it being an unwritten law between them that he should not engage himself for anything till he had seen her.

Dolly was enjoying it immensely. She watched the soldier shrug his shoulders with secret elation.

"Not dancing yet?" said Mildred, coming in. "I thought we were the last."

The first waltz had begun. The melody floated through the door leading into the ball-room. "Flirting Fanny" was floating gracefully round with Jack to the strains of "The Waltz Dream." She looked like a brilliant flower as he bent over her, murmuring soft nothings in her ear.

Dolly watched them, and her heart sank.

"Don't let us lose a moment," entreated her partner, and they whirled into the glittering crowd. Round and round they glided, threading their way through the maze of couples, their steps in perfect unison. Suddenly the waltz stopped. In an instant "D. P." was at her side.

"Why, five are gone already!" he said. "Do give me what even numbers are left. I've got heaps to say to you, and I've found a ripping Kala Jugga."

"I expect it's mine." Captain Lennox laughed. "In which case, you haven't a hope of it. If you've *quite* done with Mrs. Vane, we will proceed there."

"I like that," retorted "D. P." "I'm one of her oldest friends. You're not going to throw me over, are you?"

These imploring accents coming from a person

in the garb of a clown, his face distorted with red and white paint, sounded so funny that she couldn't help laughing, in spite of her rage. She gave him the wished-for dances.

The " Jimmy-boy " arrived next and begged for the remainder. She allowed him to annex four, retaining only a two-step she had promised Geoffrey and the last two dances, in case Jack should ask for them. (It had always been their custom to dance most of the programme together, and she hoped he would feel annoyed.) Her partner led her to the Kala Jugga he had marked for his own. To his annoyance it was already occupied, and Dolly heard Mrs. Fanshawe's voice.

" Nonsense, Captain Wyndham, you *know* you don't mean that ! "

Mean what ? Dolly thought, turning on her heel. " Your retreat seems in great request, Captain Lennox. Shall we try elsewhere ? "

. . . . . .

" I hope you've kept me some dances ? " said Jack, when they returned. " I haven't had a chance of asking you before."

Dolly would have given anything to spend most of the evening with him as of old, but she steeled herself against these feelings, and replied stiffly, " I'm afraid they're all gone."

He looked at her with astonishment. "*What!* Do you mean to tell me seriously that you've given them all away?"

Dolly's heart beat fast. He was really vexed—that was something gained.

What she said was, in penitent accents, "I'm sorry, Jack. I've nothing but the two last; you may have those."

He restrained his outraged feelings, and, inscribing his name, bowed, and departed.

Dolly was apparently in the gayest spirits. She flirted with Captain Lennox till he implored her to give him the first two Extras.

"Don't be so grasping," she expostulated. But he pleaded, till she finally consented. In the Belgaum days, these had always been Jack's peculiar property.

The band struck up the First Extra. Captain Wyndham came up to Dolly. "This is ours, at all events."

"Well, no"—she faltered—"the fact is——"

"My dance, I think," said Captain Lennox, appearing suddenly.

"As you please," said the other, and, crossing over to "Flirting Fanny," led her out.

The next dance was the "Jimmy-boy's."

"What a fetching kit!" he remarked. "It goes rather well with mine."

"So it does. Who are you?"

"A courtier of the time of Marie Antoinette. It's the only one like yours, except Wyndham's. What has he done, by the way?"

"Nothing."

"Jim-Jams" looked at her. "Well, the tables seem turned to-night. As a rule, you and Wyndham dance most of the evening, while 'D. P.' and I have to be content with what we can get. On the other hand, Lennox and Mrs. Dering have been simply inseparable, while to-night——"

"Yes, to-night?"

"You and he have been going it pretty strong, haven't you? I saw Mrs. Dering give you a furious glance just now!"

"Nonsense! we are most friendly. Didn't she implore me to take the part of 'Yum-Yum,' and I consented?"

"You hadn't annexed her best young man then!"

"Don't be silly! Isn't there a dress rehearsal to-morrow evening?"

"Yes; it's the last. We perform on Saturday night."

"Last what?" asked "D. P." coming to claim his dance.

"The last rehearsal of *The Mikado*."

"So it is! Now, 'Jim-Jams,' it's my turn!"

The subaltern led her to the side verandah, which, owing to the popularity of the garden, was unoccupied. Dolly sat down and unfurled her fan. "D. P." had an artless way of confiding in her, and he related how, when he left the service, he intended to buy an old castle in Brittany.

"Are you going to spend your life there?"

"Part of it. I'm going to make a hobby of collecting old silver and really old French furniture. Most absorbing study!"

"Do you intend taking up this absorbing study *alone*?" she demanded. "A man once told me 'he was going to embrace photography,' and I advised him to embrace something more responsive!"

"D. P." laughed. "Well—er—one must marry some day. If you could only find the right person; but that's so difficult."

The evening was nearly at an end. Dolly was beginning to be frightened at what she had done with regard to Captain Lennox. That gallant soldier was rapidly losing his head, and the game, begun out of pique, seemed likely to become more serious than she had anticipated. She was heartily tired of him, and reflected thankfully that the next two dances were Jack's. The first bars of "Valse Bleu" began, but he was not to be seen. The other dancers returned, the room

began to fill. At last he appeared, with Mrs. Fanshawe, and catching sight of Dolly, came to her. She intended to show her displeasure, but as they glided away, she told herself, seeing that Jack waltzed so perfectly, it would be foolish. Besides, his leave would soon be up—and what should she do without him ?

At the moment they were together, and as they swayed dreamily to the entrancing melody—each in perfect harmony with the other—Dolly wished they could go on for ever.

The music stopped. Jack led her across the lawn, down the path by the lotos tank, to a tent near a datura bush. Offering her an easy-chair, he seated himself in the other. Neither of them spoke for a moment. " What a comfy place ! " Dolly said at last.

" I discovered it early in the evening."

(" I wonder how often he has been here with Mrs. Fanshawe ? " she thought.) " Do you think we can hear the music ? "

" What does that matter ? The next dance is ours."

" We needn't hurry then."

Jack looked down at her. " How have you enjoyed yourself ? "

" Immensely. I don't know *when* I've enjoyed a dance more ! "

He looked into her eyes. "Really? You're quite sure of that? More than the last dance we attended together?"

Mrs. Vane looked at him saucily. "Yes, much more—at least—I——"

"Go on," he commanded.

"Captain Lennox's step suits mine exactly."

"Better than mine?"

"N-no—at least—I—I—don't know——" Suddenly she looked up. "You haven't told me yet how Mrs. Fanshawe's step suits yours?"

"Aha, my lady, so that's it—is it? I thought that would have the desired effect. My little shrew"—very tenderly—"have I tamed you at last?"

He took her in his arms, their lips met, and Dolly, hiding her head on his shoulder, wept tears of joy, like a child, who, after long wandering in the wood, finds its way home at last, and feels that all its troubles are ended.

CHAPTER XXVII

"c/o COLONEL EGERTON,
North Gloucester Regiment.

"PURDAHPUR, *Sat., Dec.* 10.

"MY DEAREST ISABEL,—Just got your happy letter. I am delighted with your news. You'll be surprised to hear that I decided to break off my understanding (which was only between ourselves) with Mr. Upton.

"Also, at the ball last night, Jack and I became engaged.

"We are both ecstatically happy, and I am now convinced that no man but Jack ever existed—as far as I am concerned.

"He says, seeing I have kept him dangling at my heels all this time, he will not give me time to change my mind again. So we are to be married almost immediately, though I would like to have waited a little while. But Jack says it is hopeless to expect me *ever* to be more sensible than I am now—so, why defer it? Poor dear! he fondly imagines he is going to keep me in great order.

"But I have my doubts about this.

"Mildred is very pleased, as he has always been a great favourite of hers.

"Jack is a most adoring lover, and wants to sit in my pocket most of the time. But I have just sent him away, as I really *must* rest. *The Mikado* performance takes place to-night—and that will be my last appearance before the engagement is given out!

"Tell me what you are doing about your clothes, dear? Can I help you with anything? I wish I could see you two married!

"How would it be if we travelled up to Secunderabad after our wedding?—that is, of course, if Jack can get his leave extended. But he is such a favourite with his Colonel, that I think he is sure to.

"Well, dear, I must go if I'm to look my best to-night, so good-bye.—Ever so much love, yours ever, DOROTHEA VANE."

"BINDAHLA, CHARLEVILLE,
Saturday, November 18.

"MY DEAREST MUMS,—I'm at Bindahla for a few days, while father goes on to Cunnamulla; he is to pick me up on his return.

"Paddy, the mail-boy, drove us into Charleville, with two relays of fresh horses. He is an excellent 'Jehu,' so the sixty-two miles went wonderfully quickly.

"Father asked him a few questions about the district, and with that Paddy's fluent tongue was loosed, and he talked on, till I found myself listening eagerly to him.

"He told father quaint stories about horses

and station happenings, drifting gradually into his personal affairs, telling us about his young wife, Nelly, who lived in Wongadilla because there wasn't yet a spare cottage for her at Munyandi. He went on to descant hopefully on the chances of getting the master to give them that new cottage at the wash-pool—when the Smith family had left. He talked of the ' bit of garden ' they could have, which would be so nice for the baby girl to play in, and how he intended to grow carrots and lettuces in a little bed near the kitchen—there would be lots of water to spare, and so on.

" We stayed at the Charleville Hotel for the night, and I was so excited when father told me that Bindahla is actually the place where Uncle Vereker captured the bushranger years ago!

" After hearing about it all my life, it's most thrilling to realise that this is the very spot where it happened.

" Father had to see a man on business, so he put me into the 10.30 a.m. train, gave me some papers, and promised to pick me up at the end of the week.

" After a while I got tired of my own society. I had eaten all the sandwiches, read the *Australasian* from cover to cover, and sat looking out of the window.

" I watched the paddocks flying past, the ring-barked trees, and the long grass beginning already to look dry with the first breath of approaching summer.

" At last I felt the train slackening, and looked out, to see a buggy, with a girl holding a pair of horses, while a man came up to the window.

" He introduced himself as Mr. Macdonald, and inquired about my luggage.

" 'What!' he said, 'only one small portmanteau? We can take that in the back of the buggy. " Come along and I'll introduce you to Miss Gray, who is holding Trumpeter and Response. Mrs. Murray is looking forward to your visit, and so are the children.'

" Miss Gray is a bright-looking girl. She told me she was glad I had come, and asked if the train was dusty.

" The horses were getting tired of waiting. Trumpeter thought it was high time they were off, as he flicked away the flies with his tail, and made several attempts to start, while Response put down his head, and tried to rub off his winkers, then pawed the ground impatiently.

" Mr. Macdonald took the reins; the horses trotted briskly homeward.

" I looked through the trees at the line of blue peaks, one above the other, towering away to westward, lightly visible in a faint bluish haze.

" Magpies and minahs perched on the fences, and chattered in the tall gum trees. An old iguana watched us lazily from a hollow log. A company of shearers rode past at a leisurely pace, their blankets and 'billies' on the backs

of two pack-horses. Miss Gray kept up a bright conversation.

"The five miles soon flew by, and the horses turned in at the homestead gates.

"The next moment we pulled up in front of a big, rambling bungalow, in a garden full of orange trees and camellia bushes, bounded on one side by a vine-clad pergola, on which the young grapes hung in clusters.

"Mrs. Murray was on the verandah, a yellow-haired child at her side. 'Here they are,' said a boy and girl coming out. 'We've been looking out for you.'

"'These are Val and Letty,' Mr. Macdonald explained. 'Children, this is Miss Hammond.'

"'Let me drive round to the stable, Hector,' begged the boy. Mr. Macdonald threw him the reins.

"'Where's the baby? This is Sibella, Miss Hammond.'

"Mrs. Murray led me indoors. 'Come in here,' she said. 'Lunch will be ready directly.'

"She led the way into the big, comfortable billiard-room. Its red-brown walls hung with weapons from every corner of the earth, appealed to me strongly. The sunshine fell softly on the inlaid handles of Japanese swords, and Indian tulwars, and tangis, lighting up a fine collection of Solomon Island spears, in the form of a trophy over the mantel-shelf.

"'Letty and Val have been on the watch for you for some time,' Mrs. Murray said. 'I

think the train was late, but we knew you were in good hands.'

"' They took great care of me,' I assured her.

"' In fact,' Miss Gray put in, ' I've been telling her of all the cheerful things we've arranged to do. About going over to Yildool and——'

"' Did you tell her about the Picnic Races ? ' asked Letty. ' I did.'

"' You've forgotten one important item ! ' exclaimed Mr. Macdonald. ' Letty and Val have learnt a new cake-walk.'

"' Mr. Winter taught us.'

"' Jimmy, the Chinese gardener, can do cake-walks too,' said Val. ' They taught him up at the men's hut. We'll make him perform for you on the back verandah, when he's watering the pots. It's so funny ! '

"' It must be,' I said. ' I never heard of a cake-walking Chinaman before ! '

"After lunch, the children begged to be allowed to take me round the place, and show me the new gamecock, the pet wallaby, the tame ' wild duck ' down at the water-hole, and other interesting properties.

"I consented, upon which they carried me off till tea-time.

"I am just scribbling this before I dress, so good-bye. Much love to Bee, and Lou-Lou, and your dear self.—Always your MARY."

Every one was seated at dinner when Mr. Murray came in.

"How do you do, Miss Hammond?" he said. "Very glad to see you here. When is your father coming? By the way, we shall have some visitors to amuse you to-morrow. Walter Hamilton and his brother are coming for the week-end. Now, Florence," with a glance at Miss Gray, "there's a chance for you."

"Please explain!"

"No explanation needed," he retorted. "I merely wish to recommend him to your notice! —fine station, Yongamah! Rather nice to have you for a neighbour."

"It sounds rather crude," said the girl playfully. "Wait till I have seen your paragon."

"Now you're getting frivolous," he said. "Just like a woman."

"Come and sing to us, Miss Hammond," said Flo Gray, when they left the dining-room. "We heard from Mrs. Barrington that you have a charming voice. I'll play your accompaniments!"

Mary went to get her songs. Flo took possession of them, drawing out several favourites.

"Of course you sing this," holding up "Absent."

"Yes do, Miss Hammond," said Mr. Winter, opening the piano. "It reminds me of Sunday dinner at home, when the governor always made us drink 'Absent Friends.'"

Flo played the opening bars. As the girl's sweet

voice rose on the air her audience became silent. They listened with breathless attention, hanging on every word she sang, applauding when it ended.

"Mrs. Barrington spoke the truth!" declared Flo. "Your voice is delightful—that little plaintive note appeals to one particularly."

"You flatter me," said the singer.

"Not at all, my dear," said her hostess. "I think you sing with a great deal of sympathy. But are you not going to give us another song?"

"Of course she is," said Flo, producing "Vorrei."

"Just once to enter there, as night is falling
In the old sweet way, just coming at your calling,
And, like an angel, bending down above you
To breathe against your ear—I love you—I love you,"

sang Mary. As the last notes of the plaintive refrain died away, Hector Macdonald came in out of the verandah, where he had retired to smoke.

"Thank you, Miss Hammond," he said gravely. "There is something about your voice which speaks to one straight from the heart. The last time I heard a girl sing that song was the night before I left the old country, and it has remained in my mind ever since. Your voice reminds me strongly of her's; it has the same appealing note, the same——" He stopped, and went out as suddenly as he had come in.

"Poor chap!" Jack Winter, said. "I always think Macdonald is suffering from unrequited

affection—some girl he left behind him in Scotland, d'you see! I suppose you don't sing anything so frivolous as 'Little Sloe Eyes,' Miss Hammond? I love 'The Cingalee,' don't you?"

"c/o Colonel Egerton,
North Gloucester Regiment.

"Purdahpur, *Sunday Dec.* 11.

"My dearest Isabel,—I don't feel much in the mood for writing, but I want you to know at once that my engagement with Jack is broken off.

"It came about in this way. After the close of *The Mikado* performance last night—which was an unprecedented success—just as Jack was taking me off to have some supper, Mrs. Dering intercepted us with a bewitching smile.

"'My *dear* Mrs. Vane,' she said, 'I have been wanting to offer my congratulations *all* the evening, but haven't had an opportunity!'

"Jack and I looked at each other and laughed.

"'But, dear lady,' I said, 'we haven't given it out yet.'

"She opened her blue eyes widely.

"'Not given it out! But I've just had a letter telling me all about it!'

"'I don't know what you mean, Mrs. Dering,' I said rather stiffly. 'Captain Wyndham and I only became engaged last night——"

"'Captain Wyndham!' in accents of affected surprise; 'but it *isn't* Captain Wyndham!'

"Jack laughed. 'Excuse me,' he said, 'you

must allow me to know best. Mrs. Vane has promised to be my wife ! '

" ' Oh, naughty, naughty,' said Mrs. Dering, shaking her fan at me. ' Cruel little lady, to trifle with the affections of *two* men.'

" Jack looked annoyed. ' I am quite in the dark,' he said. ' Please explain what you mean.'

" She put on an expression of artless innocence (cat). ' I'm *very* sorry if I've said anything unpleasant. The fact is, I heard from an old schoolfellow in Australia yesterday — a Miss Hunter, who is governess on a station.

" ' She asked me if I had met Mrs. Vane, and spoke of her engagement to Mr. Upton, a neighbour of theirs, who, she said, was just leaving for India to be married. Naturally, I wished to be the very *first* to offer my congratulations.'

" Did you ever know such a spiteful cat ? This unexpected bombshell absolutely took my breath away. I was speechless.

" Jack went white to the lips with rage.

" ' Is this true, Dolly ? ' he asked sternly ; ' but no—it's unbelievable.'

" ' Yes—but—that is——' I began.

" ' *What !* ' turning on me fiercely. ' Am I to understand that you have been engaged to this Mr.—Upton—ever since your return to India ? Surely it can't be true ? '

" ' I wasn't engaged—that is—we had an understanding—but only between ourselves.'

" He stopped me. ' Do you mind coming into

the verandah, where we can finish our conversation alone.'

"'Now,' he said, when he had found two chairs beside a bamboo table at the end of the verandah, 'Please go on. Why did you deliberately keep this "understanding"—as you call it—from me? Have I deserved this, Dolly?'

"'It was only between ourselves,' I murmured.

"'Was it necessary to keep it from me, when you knew I cared, that I had been trying to win your love for the last two years?'

"'I broke it off,'" I said faintly.

"'Oh, you did, did you? How long ago?'

"'I cabled last week—and——'"

"'Last week only—and you have allowed me to dance attendance on you day after day, ever since you landed here, when all the time you were secretly engaged to another man. Do think that was playing the game, Dolly?'

"I don't mind telling you, Isabel, that I felt then what a little wretch I had been. His words brought it home to me in the most humiliating manner. I was dying to tell him so, and confess that I cared for him more than any one on earth, and that if he would only forgive me I would never flirt again while life lasted. But my pride wouldn't let me, so I only said, 'I didn't know you cared so much.'

"'Didn't know?—what, after two years of absolute devotion? Great Heaven, haven't women any sense of honour?'

"I got angry then, and taking off the seal ring

he had put on my finger—till he could get a real engagement one—I threw it down on the table, and told him I gave him back his liberty, and I hoped he would find some one who would live up to his high ideals, as I despaired of ever doing so. Then I flounced away with my head in the air, and fortunately met 'D. P.', so we went off together. When we got home, I followed Mildred to her room and told her. She is dreadfully upset about it, and blames me severely. I know I'm in the wrong, but I'm not going to give in and say so. Nothing will induce me to do it. Jack is trying to console himself by flirting with Mrs. Fanshawe; he takes her out riding frequently. The dreadful part of it is, that his leave will be up in a few days, and then he will go far away, and perhaps I shall never see him again!

"Why did I *ever* be so foolish as to embark on that idiotic flirtation with Dick Upton? How happy I might have been but for that wretched entanglement!

"I do wish you were here, Isabel; I feel too wretched for words. Mrs. Dering is delighted, of course. She wished to punish me for Captain Lennox's defection at the ball. But she has not entirely scored off me, because her once devoted admirer persists in haunting me whenever he is off the chain, and I only endure it because I know it irritates her. This sounds very 'catty,' but, really, life is too exasperating at the moment.

"Write me at once.—With much love, yours ever, DOROTHEA VANE."

CHAPTER XXVIII

Mary was awakened at an early hour by the magpies singing in the pine trees. Out in the garden the children were already playing. She dressed herself, and went to join them. Letty and Val received her with open arms, and took her to feed the chickens.

"That's Lord Kitchener," explained Val, indicating a fine gamecock of warlike aspect. "And that's Adam and Eve and Co.," showing her a huge turkey gobbler with his household.

"Your names are splendid."

"That was Val's idea," said Letty. "Those two smaller gobblers are Cain and Abel."

"The wallaby ought to have a name too," said Sibella. "He's just wallaby."

"Let's call him 'Buckmaster,'" suggested Mary.

This gave complete satisfaction, and it was decided to adopt it.

"There's the gong," said Letty. "Run and wash your hands, Sibella, they're all dirty."

"They're not," stoutly.

"Come to my room and we will wash them there," said Mary.

. . . . . .

"I'm going to leave you girls for a little," Mrs. Murray announced after breakfast, "while I set the domestic wheels going for the day."

"Wait a moment," said her husband. "Miss Hammond, wouldn't you like to see the place where your respected uncle captured the bush-ranger years ago? I've just got ten minutes to spare."

"I should, indeed. Father told us the story when we were small children. I never thought I should see the place where it occurred."

"Come along then. Flo, you've heard it before."

"That doesn't matter. It will stand telling again."

Passing the station store and the outbuildings, they reached the stockyard, where Sam was engaged in trying a young one. Sam—a slim, red-haired person—sat calmly in the saddle, swaying lightly with every movement of the vicious-looking chestnut, who, after remaining preternaturally quiet for a few moments, suddenly put down his head and executed a series of "bucks" that would have unseated any one but the finished artiste on his back

"Why, he is blind of one eye," said Flo.

Mr. Murray laughed. "Yes; the other is probably lying on top of the fence. Sam used to wear it on these occasions, but one day he had rather a hard tussle with a colt, and I arrived on the scene to find the men hunting in the sand for Sam's eye! Since then he takes it out, and deposits it on a high place, out of danger."

He went a little farther, and stopped in front of an aged corner-post, with a panel of fencing attached—the whole structure showing signs of the wear and tear of many seasons. "These are the remains of the old stockyard of thirty years ago," he affirmed. "That post fell down once, but I had it carefully lifted up and put in again. They tell the story still, in various ways, but I believe the real facts are that your uncle drove over here one day with Mr. Lowther, and, to his surprise, found all the station hands sitting on the stockyard fence, while a gentleman, brandishing a revolver, was swaggering up and down. He had threatened to shoot the first man who moved a finger, so they felt disinclined to descend. Isn't that the story?"

"Quite correct so far."

"Very well. I believe when your uncle and Mr. Lowther drove up, the bushranger walked over to the buggy and peremptorily ordered

them to get down. They pretended to obey him, and got out quietly. As they did so, his attention was attracted for one second, and in that second your uncle rushed him, threw up the hand that held the revolver, and took it from him. Mr. Lowther came to his assistance, and they tied him up to the verandah post. The men got down from the fence, and one of them galloped off for the police."

"Those must have been stirring days!" said Mary.

"Well, my ten minutes are up. I'll tell you another story to-morrow." And he departed to interview the overseer.

"We are going for a ride this afternoon," Flo announced.

"How delightful! Mr. Winter said I might have Nightshade."

"I wish you joy of her. She pulls frightfully."

"I dare say I'll be able to hold her."

"I wonder when the Hamiltons will come?" Flo continued. "We're driving to Yildool to-morrow, and the more the merrier."

. . . . . .

It was three o'clock in the afternoon—a radiant day of blue and gold. A still, drowsy feeling was in the air. Overhead a few clouds floated

lazily across the heavens. The whole landscape showed signs of approaching summer. Yarrow, the old collie, lay basking in the sun. A couple of men walked up to the station store to buy small luxuries.

"No sign of the Hamiltons," remarked Flo, as she settled her habit. Hector had just mounted her on Romeo.

"It's early yet," said Mary. She was already on Nightshade, Jack Winter's mare, who dragged impatiently at her bridle. The flies were teasing her, and she was fretting to be away over the paddocks.

"That girth of yours wants tightening," said Winter, appearing suddenly.

"Why, you said you had to take a message to the fencers, and couldn't come with us!" exclaimed Flo.

"Quite true, but half a dozen things delayed me. I came to see if Joe had put my bridle on Nightshade." He unbuckled the girth, and took it up a couple of holes. As he did so, Mr. Murray's voice was heard calling—"John, *John*."

"I expect he'll give me rats," said Jack, "for not having left sooner."

"Let us go part of the way with you," suggested Flo.

"Very well," he responded. "Panic is saddled; I'll follow you directly."

He galloped after them a few moments later, just as they were crossing the creek.

"You haven't wasted much time," Hector remarked.

"No, the old man let me down easily. What do you think of Nightshade, Miss Hammond?" as they climbed the bank, and trotted briskly over the plain.

"She goes like a bird," enthusiastically.

Flo and Hector had dropped behind.

"By Jove! Bruno has found a kangaroo!" exclaimed Jack. "Come along, Miss Hammond." He put spurs to his horse, and galloped off after the dogs. Nightshade asked for nothing more. With one bound she was off across the plain. But the kangaroo knew better than to stay in the open. Plunging swiftly into a thick belt of gidya scrub, he gave the dogs all they knew to keep up with him, taking flying leaps over stumps, fallen trees—anything that lay in his path. The other two came tearing up, and the whole party dashed through the bush at top speed, winding in and out among the straggling timber, as they strained every nerve to intercept the fleet-footed animal before he could gain the shelter of the ranges. On they

flew, crashing breathlessly through a forest of gum saplings—jumping everything in their way ; the dead leaves crackling under their horses' hoofs ; the breeze blowing on their cheeks. Nightshade began to get excited. Throwing her head from side to side, she pulled harder and harder—trying to get the bit between her teeth.

" Take hold of her by the head," called Winter.

Mary laughed as she flew past. " It's all right," she said, putting Nightshade straight at the blackened trunk of a giant pine lying across the track. The mare raced at the obstacle, and taking off, with several feet to spare, sailed over it. Lighting on her feet as nimbly as a cat, she rushed madly through the scrub in the wake of the dogs. " That girl can ride," Winter thought, but as he watched her, his face paled with a ghastly fear. The mare was heading straight for a gum tree, with overhanging branches, one of which stretched itself straight across the track like some weird arm, waiting to deal destruction to all who came in its way.

" Great Heaven ! She will be killed." The bare thought turned him cold with horror. " Pull her head round to the left ! " he shouted, making a speaking-trumpet of his hands.

Mary strove with all her strength to follow

his advice; but Nightshade's mouth had turned to iron. In vain she strained every nerve to wrench her head away from the grim danger looming in front, to which every stride brought her nearer. Finding her efforts were fruitless, she uttered a silent prayer, and lying flat on the saddle, her head hanging down, her arms round the mare's neck she braced herself to meet it. A piece of bark grazed her spine as they raced under the bough, and she shuddered to think of the cruel death she had so narrowly escaped.

Resuming her seat, she succeeded at last in checking Nightshade's headlong career. Gradually she slackened her pace, relapsing finally into a canter.

"By Jove! that was a close call!" Winter said, riding up alongside. "Thank God you're safe. I held my breath while she took you under that beastly tree. If you hadn't had the nerve to lie flat, you must have been killed!"

"Never mind! I'm thankful to have escaped so easily."

"They've got him at last," cried Flo, catching them up a moment later, as they rounded a clump of wattles, in time to see the kangaroo take a tremendous leap, and go splashing into a water-hole, closely pursued by the dogs. Ex-

hausted by the long run, with a mighty effort he reached the opposite bank. Escape was hopeless. Game to the last, he turned and stood at bay, facing the dogs, who closed in on him, barking furiously, while, with the courage of despair, he fought desperately for his life.

Again and again, headed by Bruno, they rush on him, thirsting for his blood, but with indomitable pluck he still holds his own. Flora has fallen, bleeding copiously from the ghastly wound inflicted by his sharp claws. Skipper is down too, fighting tooth and nail; but the unequal contest—fiercely as it wages—is nearly at an end.

. . . . . .

"It's all over," Macdonald said, reappearing with the tail, which he tied on to his saddle.

"I must go, or there will be trouble!" Winter exclaimed; and he cantered off.

"Here they are," called Letty, as Flo came racing up the paddock, followed by Mary and Hector, Bruno and the other dogs stringing out behind.

"Did you bring home the tail?"

"We did."

"Hurrah! Kangaroo soup!"

"How did you like Nightshade?" Letty asked. "Did she pull?"

"I should think she did," Flo retorted.

"Bolted off in the bush, and nearly killed Miss Hammond by running her under a low bough."

"How dreadful!"

"Have the visitors arrived?" Flo inquired.

"Yes; they're in the billiard-room."

"I hope you enjoyed the ride, barring your exciting rush under that tree?" Macdonald said, as they followed Flo to the billiard-room. "Miss Gray and I missed that; but Winter told me you were wonderfully plucky!"

The Hamiltons proved to be a decided acquisition. The elder one was discovered to be the owner of a good tenor voice. Mary was constrained to produce her songs, with all of which he confessed to an intimate acquaintance, and the appreciative audience kept them at the piano, performing in turn, for the best part of the evening.

CHAPTER XXIX

NEXT day being Sunday, breakfast was an hour later, and the house-party drifted into the garden.

As they strolled among the orange trees and oleanders, the air was fragrant with the scent of white lilac. They wandered into the enclosure, combining orchard and vegetable garden, which ran down to the banks of the Warrego. Here, among leafy grape trellises they came upon the presiding genius, Jimmy Low Ping—the "cake-walking" celestial—of whose performances Val had boasted. He had quite a pleasing cast of countenance, smiling broadly on the children.

"Good-morning, James," said Flo. "When will those grapes be ripe?"

"Glapes lipe at Klissmas, missee. You likem glapes?"

"Come and see his vegetables." They followed him, carrying his two buckets of water on a yoke, down the neat lines of cabbages and cauliflowers, to a lettuce-bed, which he was about to irrigate.

"I must tell you," she explained, "that Low Ping is a great ally of mine. The first time he heard my name, he said, 'Allee same *colour* glay.' Another day he was watering the plants on the verandah, and heard me practising a song. Looking round, I saw him listening at the open window. 'Good-morning, Miss Glay,' he said. 'That welly beauty song—you sing—you play—allee same time!'"

The lettuce-bed was near the waterside. Jimmy filled his buckets at the tank, fed by an ingenious arrangement, by which one set of buckets came up from the river and emptied themselves as another went down.

Presently Macdonald took out his watch. "I don't wish to hurry you," he said, "but it's time we got ready for the drive."

. . . . . .

"Now, young people, are we ready?" inquired Mr. Murray, while the house-party arranged itself among the three vehicles drawn up. "Flo, are you coming with me?"

"Too late. I've promised to drive with Mr. Hamilton; his brother will go with you."

Her godfather was about to say something, but stopped.

"Miss Hammond," said Macdonald, "I believe I am to have the honour of your company?"

Every one finally got under way. Letty and Val mounted their ponies, and cantered on to open the gates.

Walter Hamilton, who was driving tandem, had some trouble with his leader. Blue Peter suddenly displayed a strange aversion to going through gates or slip-rails, before each of which he took a fiendish joy in forming himself into an acute angle with the wheeler, requiring much diplomacy to inveigle him through the aperture.

"Let *me* drive?" suggested Flo. "I don't believe you can steer a tandem!"

"Don't you?"

"No—you see——"

"Yes?"

"Your whole method is wrong."

"You think so?" vainly endeavouring to induce Blue Peter to go through a gate.

She laughed as the exasperating animal backed, plunged, and tied himself and the wheeler into "sailors' knots."

"You brute!" Hamilton exclaimed, giving him a cut with the whip. Blue Peter retorted by rearing, till it appeared as if he would fall back on the buggy.

Things went differently in Hector's trap. Whisper and Commanchee trotted briskly along

the track. The thick grass began to show a faint tinge of brown. The ground was dotted with wild orchids and buttercups. The magpies warbled in the trees the old song of promised love and happiness—that eternal roundelay of Spring, which we believe so implicitly in our youth, and even after—while there is a vestige of romance in our hearts.

Mary felt all this. It reminded her of Dick, and she thought sadly of the future they had looked forward to so happily. They hoped her father would let him manage one of the stations near Longreach, and talked gaily of the blissful life they were to spend there. Far away from neighbours—but what did that matter? She was to ride or drive with him every day. Ah, if she could only wake up and find it was all a dream!

She roused herself, and tried to reply naturally to Hector, who kept up a flow of conversation. But, in spite of these strenuous efforts, she felt thankful to see that they were nearing their destination.

"This is Yildool," Macdonald said. A turn in the avenue of pines disclosed an old-fashioned garden, its laurel hedges and lawns flanked by beds of roses.

The house half-hidden by a huge kurrajong and

various cedars, while the verandah was framed in purple wistaria. On the steps a brown-eyed child sat playing with a fox-terrier.

"What a pretty home!" Mary said.

"Yes; Farquhar always keeps it in apple-pie order. His wife is a good sort, and the best horsewoman in the district."

"Really?"

"Yes, she is a capital whip too—drives tandem, and handles her horses splendidly."

The fox-terrier began barking loudly, then ran down to meet them.

"How are you, Nelly?" said Hector.

"Quite well, thank you. Where are Val and Letty?"

"Not far off." As he spoke, the two children cantered up the drive. Just then a tall young woman came out to greet them, with welcome writ large on her bright face. As she reached the steps the other vehicles drove up.

"I'm so glad you were able to come," Mrs. Farquhar said, as the various guests were presented. "Nelly was most excited about the arrival of Val and Letty."

"I'm afraid you spoil them," Mrs. Murray said. "Val told me the other day that it was much more interesting at Yildool.'

"He is a duck—no mother could help spoiling

him. But come and take off your dust-coats. Lunch is just coming."

. . . . . .

"We will have our coffee out here," said the hostess, leading the way to the west end of the verandah. Latticed arches of Moorish design screened this corner from the sun. Squares of Eastern matting covered the floor. Several Singhalese chairs were spread about, flanked by bamboo tables laden with periodicals. Tall palms stood in corners, while a hammock hung under the vine leaves.

"What a charming place!" exclaimed Mrs. Murray, sinking into a Colombo chair, as the maid appeared with the coffee on a brass tray.

"This is Lena's latest fad," Farquhar explained. "She brought these things to remind her of the East. It makes a jolly smoke-room, so I let her have her way."

"It's a charming way," said Flo. "I feel as if I were back at Colombo."

"I feel flattered that it takes you there," Mrs. Farquhar said. "You know we spent a month in Ceylon, staying with some planter friends on their tea-estates!"

"How delightful! I have always longed to see the East," said Mary.

"Really? I must show you some snapshots."

She took an album from the table and gave it to Mary. "What a delicious garden!" looking at the second page, wherein Mrs. Farquhar was depicted in a rickshaw in front of a white-pillared bungalow, with a background of palms.

"That's Le Vallon, the Oliphants' tea-estate, near Rambodde; the man by the rickshaw is Mr. Oliphant. His wife is talking to Ned."

"Tell them about the thrilling experience you had after I left," said her husband.

"Shall I?"

"Yes, do tell us," Macdonald begged.

"An old friend of mine has a rubber plantation at Bentota, and promised me some big-game shooting. Elephants, y'know," Farquhar explained.

"So he left me with Mrs. Austin, at Mindula, an old schoolfellow."

"You'd have thought she was all right there."

"Be quiet, Ned! Alice Austin asked me if I'd like to go to Rothschild, the next estate, six miles off. Her horse went lame, so I had to go in the 'carrying-chair.' It had a palm-leaf roof, and looked fairly comfortable. Mr. Austin rode in front, while I was carried on the shoulders of four coolies, with two emergency men following.

"We started off on zigzagging paths, about a foot and a half wide, up and down the steep

hills, and I got very tired of it. To begin with, I couldn't sit up straight without putting my head through the roof. Then the coolies in the lead were indifferently matched, causing the chair to slant uncomfortably. The shorter one invariably walked next the yawning precipice on one side of the road, and I wondered what would happen if he stumbled.

" However, when we reached our destination, things improved rapidly. Rothschild Estate is one of the loveliest spots in Ceylon. Our host, Mr. Bellinger, and his charming wife gave us a hearty welcome, and we spent a most delightful day, starting home rather late.

" The shadows grew longer. Twilight found us in the most rugged part of the mountain pass. Darkness was upon us, falling suddenly like a curtain. Mr. Austin was out of sight, but I expected to see him as we rounded the next line of frowning rocks, towering on either side. However, when the coolies had tramped another quarter of a mile, and he was still invisible, I asked what had become of master.

" They answered in Singhalese, pointing ahead.

" It was now so dark that I couldn't see my hand in front of me, and the coolies began quarrelling among themselves ; they wrangled so violently that I really thought they would

come to blows, and wished fervently I had never left Alice."

"Were you frightened?"

"Frightened! I was speechless! Just as I felt desperate, a tiny point of light appeared. Gradually it resolved itself into a lantern, carried by Mr. Austin. He came up, and asked me if I would like to walk the rest of the way? I scrambled out of the hateful chair, and walked beside him. The poor man had trotted on and forgot all about me. When Alice asked where I was, he suddenly remembered, and said I was behind. She scolded him soundly, and sent him back to meet me."

"What an exciting adventure!" said Flo.

"Rather too exciting. I vowed I'd never enter a 'carrying-chair' again."

"What did your husband say?"

"He called me a little coward!"

"So you were. Fancy a woman of your height being afraid of six little coolies! Why, if you had scolded them, they would have been terrified."

"What about your shooting in the low-country?" asked Mr. Murray.

"Corking! Best sport I've ever had. You see those funny things nailed against the wall—what do you think they are?"

"Haven't the foggiest idea."

"Elephants' tails."

"Nonsense!"

"Quite true; I give you my word. Johnson has twenty-five of them hanging up in his hall—he's a great shikari. They had an elephant kraal in my honour; there was a 'baby' in the herd too. By Jove! how it did squeal!"

. . . . . .

"May I smoke?" asked Hector, on the return journey. "Would you mind?"

"Not a bit."

"Thank you," proceeding to fill his pipe. "Would you care to drive? I'm sure you're an excellent whip."

"I ought to be," taking the reins. "Having been born and brought up at Buckaminjah, I've had plenty of practice. Eric and I have ridden and driven nearly every day of our lives. He is away on a trip to England, or he would have come here with us."

"You must come out kangaroo-hunting again. Miss Gray told you about the Picnic Races at Bongalong on Tuesday. We want to drive over to them."

"I should love to go."

"It's always good fun at Bongalong; the Middletons are nice people. They had a young

Englishman named Beveridge staying there the other day—busy taking notes about Australian manners and customs. Mrs. Middleton says he's going to write a book. Rather a funny thing happened the other day. They took him to see the shearing, and he walked about the shed, observing everything. He asked questions of one or two of the men in a lordly manner and quite enjoying himself, till—just before leaving—he overheard one shearer remark to another, 'I'll bet he's a bloomin' "New Chum," jackeroo!'"

"It must have hurt his vanity."

"Oh, it did. He was simply furious!"

"I hope he won't be too hard on us. It's no use writing about the country, after spending three months in it—flying from one large town to another, with an occasional week-end in the country. It only gives rise to utterly wrong impressions. Now, Mr. Foster Frazer's book—barring a few mistakes—is excellent, tells the unvarnished truth about many things, and should do the country real service."

"Exactly! It is also admirably illustrated. The Boer War enlightened the people at home to a certain extent about the capabilities of Australia, but our faulty legislation has done much to destroy that impression. At this

moment the Labour Party are doing their best to ruin the country with their iniquitous Land Tax."

"It is very exasperating. I read a book some time ago, by an up-to-date English authoress, in which she calmly remarked, 'Strange, one never finds an Australian quite—*quite* a lady!' This really seemed rather uncalled-for."

"I should think it was."

"Especially as the perpetrator of this scathing speech has never visited this country, and probably rushed to this conclusion after seeing a few unfavourable specimens."

"Exactly!" Hector laughed. "One feels inclined to say to her gently, 'My dear lady, has it ever occurred to you that we, on our part, frequently come in contact with second-rate English tourists—both here and abroad? but it never enters our brain to regard them as representative of the best English society—we know better than that—and we naturally expect our cousins in the old country to exercise the same discrimination.'"

CHAPTER XXX

It was on a sunshiny morning that a mixed company of men and maidens left their homes to attend the Picnic Races at Bongalong. The grass was green as an English meadow; the recent rains had laid the dust, without interfering with the soundness of the tracks.

The cheerful company was variously provided as to carriages and mounted with greater attention to efficiency than uniformity.

Well-bred riding-horses were plentiful, particularly among the feminine division, and more than one of the fast, easy hackneys had earned the "blue ribbon" in the agricultural showyard of the district.

Gay were the gibes and jests of the laughing girls and stalwart youths as they swept through the forest glades. The glamour of youth apparently inspired the whole company, who fared joyously forth, to arrive at the appointed place in time for the first event.

As this was not a registered race meeting,

the improvements were inexpensive and temporary. The grand stand was a plainly constructed platform, its roof composed of saplings and green branches—sufficient to afford shade during the present meeting.

But if Art was rude, Nature had been gracious. The race-course track—circular of necessity—had been marked out round the banks of a lake, the blue waters of which formed a picturesque adjunct to the surrounding woodland.

The whole area formed part of the estate of a wealthy squatter, one of the leading country gentlemen of the district — a sport-loving Anglo-Australian who, assisted by his wife and a large family, maintained the early English traditions at their hospitable mansion. He had been unanimously elected Judge and Master of the Revels.

The buggy-pairs, having been unharnessed, were tied up and left fed; the riding-horses were retained by the owners, who, between the races, enjoyed a gallop round the course.

But now a large bell, rung in an agitated manner, betokened that business was imminent. "Saddle up" was the order, and thereupon half a dozen good-looking steeds lined up and awaited the starter's word. There being no starting gate—that beneficent invention as yet

confined to the larger courses—there was the usual backing and twisting, rearing and kicking; but finally the contending steeds were let go, fairly well together, for the "Trial Stakes."

This was a race which, without being highly sensational, excited a certain amount of interest, on account of a local "crack" and a metropolitan "flyer" being concerned in it.

The four other horses were something above average merit, but, unless accident interfered with the favourites, were not likely to have a show. Still, they contributed to the general entertainment. As the mettled coursers fell into line, opinions were divided. Reprisal, the Brisbane horse—a well-trained, dangerous-looking brown, carrying top weight—had the support of all the talent, being backed down to three to one.

The local favourite went out at ten to one, at which price a few sovereigns and half-sovereigns, and more half-crowns, were speculated. The others—"unhonoured and unsung"—took their "pipe-openers" past the stand with great confidence and appearance of pace.

"Highland Mary," a white-legged chestnut mare; "Graysteel," a veteran stock-horse; "Tomboy," a raw filly, but well-bred enough; and "Will o' the Wisp," a speedy weed—after

much delay and many false starts—got away, more or less together, "Tomboy" taking the lead in great style with all the insolent rashness of unchastened youth. The local favourite and the metropolitan hero remained in humble positions, awaiting the period when the "sprinter" should come back to them, as was looked upon as a certainty.

This race—the victory of the Brisbane horse being a foregone conclusion, according to the knowing division—proved a "boil-over," in turf phraseology, inasmuch as the certainty broke down and, pulling up dead lame, failed to get a place, while the local favourite slipped and fell at the sharp turn before entering the straight, permitting the audacious "Tomboy" to romp in, followed by "Graysteel" and the remaining horses.

The victorious outsider, who had started at twenty-five to one, was the property of a sporting shearer, who had reasons of his own for believing that "she had the pace, if she could last it out."

The morning being nearly over, it was announced that only one other race would be run before lunch. This contest, known as the "Scurry Stakes," post entry, and half a sovereign entrance, brought a dozen active-looking nags of various ages, colours, and degrees of quality

to the post. Their riders required much marshalling, restraining, not to say reviling, on the part of the starter before they could be got into a decent position.

At length that astute official dropped the flag to something like a start, and away they went, stringing out like a flock of wild-fowl on their way to an inland lake, three or four decidedly in the lead, a long line of the hopeless section following perseveringly, which, as the distance post was past, began to close up. Then a speedy outsider came through his horses, and, catching the leading pair, who were fighting desperately for a dead heat, made a terrific rally on the post, and won by a head—a short one at that.

The excitement was tremendous. The grand stand shook to its slender foundation with the storm of applause. The amateur jocks were warmly congratulated on their riding, confidently asserted to be worthy of Flemington or Randwick.

The judge's utterance, "I declare Bronzewing to be the winner of the 'Scurry Stakes,'" produced a temporary lull, when every one voted for an adjournment till three o'clock, when the steeplechase, the great event of the day, would take place.

"By Jove! that was a good race!" Hector

declared. He had driven the two girls over early in the day, and they stood beside him on the box-seat of the buggy, from which they had watched the exciting event.

"Wasn't it?" Mary responded. "Who owns Bronzewing? Do you know?"

"Haven't an idea—rank outsider."

"That's the best of it," Flo declared. "It's so thrilling when these outsiders carry off the prize. I'm sorry for those two horses; they'd have got a dead heat, if the dark horse hadn't snatched it from them on the post."

"You never know what will win *any* given race," Hector affirmed.

"Quite so," remarked Mr. Farquhar, coming up. "That's why racing men lose money at this engaging pastime. Come and have some lunch; the wife sent me to ask you all. Hamilton is helping her lay the cloth. He got here just in time to see the finish."

"Really," said Miss Gray. "He never told us he was coming."

"I fancy he is going to ride," Farquhar said.

Luncheon was nearly over. Mary was sitting on a small case of champagne, while Macdonald offered her a plate of sandwiches.

"Where is Mr. Winter?" asked the hostess.

"I fancy his services were required," Hector

said. "He was very keen to come, but I told him yesterday he had no hope."

"Perhaps one of the Middleton boys has offered him a mount," Mrs. Farquhar said. "He is such a first-class 'jock.' I hope he will come."

"Your hopes are vain, dear lady."

"Unsympathetic person!" she retorted. "You're very hard on him. Besides——"

"Besides, he poses as an admirer of yours," her husband said.

"Exactly; he pays me compliments on my driving, so convincingly that I almost believe him."

"What a mistake!" Flo laughed. "I never believe those sort of people. The more convincingly they tell you pretty things the less they mean it, has been my experience."

"Please go on, Miss Gray," Hector said. "Do give us a few of your 'experiences'?"

"I don't think I feel able. Think of something more amusing."

. . . . . .

The warning notes of the saddling bell rang sharply out as they walked up to the stand.

"We're in the nick of time," Hamilton said. "Hulloa! Here's another sportsman arriving!"

As he spoke, a vehicle was seen coming through

the trees, and a man, driving a "sulky," dashed into the enclosure, his pony's smoking sides testifying to the pace at which he had been driven.

"I'm hanged if it isn't Winter after all!" as the new arrival drew up in front of them.

"Winter it is," responded that young man, jumping lightly down, when it became apparent that he was attired in breeches and boots.

"You don't mean to say you're going to ride?"

"Well, rather! One of my racing friends wired to ask me if I'd ride his horse, and, by great good luck, I got round the old man to let me come at the last moment. Tie up my horse, like a good fellow. I'll do as much for you another time."

Hastily diving under the seat, he produced a halter, which he gave the other, and disappeared hurriedly through the gate into the saddling paddock.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE two girls looked at each other.

"That was a masterly stroke!" exclaimed Flo. "Imagine him descending on us like a 'bolt from the blue'!"

Macdonald shrugged his shoulders. "Mr. Murray had no idea of letting him come when we left."

"Poor Mr. Winter! I'm glad he got here!"

"He said he was going to try his best," Mary averred.

"He's plenty of determination. That has helped him to get his own way, in spite of every obstacle—and——"

"And arrive exactly at the psychological moment," said Hamilton. "That chap must have a good organising head, with a certain amount of audacity."

"I always admire audacity when I see it," Flo declared. "There is nothing like it for getting what you want."

. . . . . .

At all country meetings in Australia, the

steeplechase is the most important and exciting. Nowhere is the training of cross-country jumpers more carefully conducted or more closely watched. Nowhere are the fences so still and unyielding—it may even be averred that nowhere are they more dangerous. This, of course, adds more excitement to the contest, and the uncertainty as to the winner accentuates the element of chance.

For weeks before the Bongalong Picnic Races, owners and riders of timber-jumpers in the neighbourhood had been in a state of suppressed anxiety while the necessary preparation was going on. Trials of speed at earliest dawn. Schooling of untried performers at all sorts of fences, at all hours of the day. Several outlying districts were represented, the local celebrities' claims being stoutly debated. Mameluke, a half-Arab grey, was, perhaps, the favourite, particularly among the girls. As he went past the stand with young Fred Middleton, one of the sons of the house "up," an experienced "jock," there was a chorus of admiration.

It only subsided as Jack Winter followed on a well-bred, unassuming bay with black points, not apparently troubling himself with any display of speed. A comparative stranger, he was, however, well backed, and evidently had a provincial reputation.

On reference to the printed card, he was found to be entered as "Buccaneer" (half-brother to Bushranger). He was obviously a "take down," in the language of the rural ring—that is, an animal better than he looked—and had possibly been raced in better company before now.

The other five starters, of whom no particular notice was taken, were more or less well-bred specimens of the ordinary Australian hackney type—fast, enduring, hardy, and high-couraged—but not possessing sufficient "class" to entitle them to metropolitan honours. All the same, they had their friends, who would risk a modest crown or two upon their chance of winning—as the little group of men and girls surrounding each competitor plainly showed.

They had seen Dragon Fly, or Brian Boru, jump: he *could* do it in style, and would never be made to believe that he couldn't gallop fast enough for anything he was likely to meet here.

So, full of the confidence of sympathetic neighbourly feeling, the riders ranged themselves in line, and, as the flag dropped, went away without the jealousy characteristic of larger fields.

At the first fence—two-railed, with brush to the top—every horse jumped well and clear, except the impetuous Kate o' Shane. She was an "illegant lepper" in the opinion of her

owner, "but the divil a bit of patience she had —bad 'cess to her." She hit the top rail handsomely, but made up for it by flying the next fence with nearly a foot to spare, confirming her lead in the most triumphant manner for the next half-mile. Then another candidate, not unknown to fame, in the shape of Buccaneer, came along as she fell back, and the race was once more in doubt.

The undistinguished division, more excitable and less experienced, were quickly at speed, leaving a considerable gap between them and the favourites. They were evidently watching each other, and only made play sufficiently to keep within touch of the scampering leaders. At the distance post, these began to come back, while the steady stride and regulated speed of their opponents began to tell.

Then Mameluke challenged and, with apparently little effort, shot to the lead, closely followed by Buccaneer, going well within himself. As the leading horses approached the last leap, a stranger, who had kept wide up to this interesting stage, drew in and showed a marked intention to make a dead heat of it—if not to win. Well and carefully ridden, he was certainly catching up the leaders; and as the three horses rose at the fence, almost at the same moment, a shout of "Wallaroo! Wallaroo wins!" cleft the air,

and the hopes rose high of those who had backed the unknown at twenty to one.

These hopes were doomed to be dashed to the ground as the horse struck the stiff rail heavily, turning a complete somersault and rolling over his rider. For one brief instant he lay motionless, then, swiftly recovering himself kicked the prostrate jockey in the face, smashing his jaw and knocking half a dozen teeth out of the unfortunate boy's mouth.

A cry of horror went up from the impromptu grand stand, as the blood poured from a ghastly wound. Help was immediately procured, a stretcher was improvised, and the poor fellow was quickly carried to an adjacent tent, where the local medico attended to him. A hat was sent round, and eleven pounds were collected for him in as many minutes. Meanwhile, the other two leaders ran it out, when Buccaneer won on the post, only beating Mameluke by a neck.

So the steeplechase, the "blue ribbon" of the Bongalong Picnic Race Meeting, came to an end; and when it was finally ascertained that the wounded jockey, though suffering a good deal of pain, was not in any immediate danger, afternoon tea was announced, and every one's spirits recovered.

"I suppose you were surprised to see me, Miss Hammond?" asked Winter.

They were kneeling on the grass, at the rear of Mrs. Farquhar's cart, boiling the "billy," while a row of teacups stood ready.

"Surprised! I was speechless! Flo and I were wound up to a fearful pitch of excitement over that race; we were delighted you won."

"So am I, though Wallaroo nearly got it. Buccaneer is run by a sporting farmer. I have an interest in him myself, so, naturally, I was keen to ride him."

"Of course. How *did* you manage it?"

"Well, I've been working like a nigger for days before this. I got the old man in a good temper, and asked him if I fetched the Bald Hill sheep down in time, I could rip over and ride in the steeplechase. He hummed and hawed, finally said, 'Yes, if the sheep were here.' I went after the sheep, fetched 'em down, dressed, and galloped Panic about three-parts of the way, and just got here in time, as you saw."

"Bravo! you earned your victory."

The "billy" began boiling furiously. Jack lifted it off, and stood watching Mary as she poured the creamy brown beverage into the cups waiting to receive it.

"You were in luck's way," said Hamilton, coming up to help. "Fancy getting here and pulling off the race after all!"

"You wouldn't have had a chance if Wallaroo had been able to stand up," Hector declared.

"Never mind," Mrs. Farquhar said. "He *didn't* 'stand up,' and Mr. Winter won, which is the point—particularly as I backed him."

"That accounts for your joy at Winter's victory," said her husband. "Women always have an eye to business."

"Now, Ned, *don't* begin disparaging our sex. He always annoys me by saying we have no sense of humour."

Flo laughed. "That's so obviously untrue, we needn't take it seriously. Now, I consider the only thing to be said for the sterner sex is, that the house is dull without them."

"Do you, indeed?" Hamilton retorted.

"I do," saucily. "They're a faithless, frivolous race, though I still think——"

"Yes; go on."

"I still believe that, among all the millions of your erratic sex, there must be half a dozen or so really reliable and worthy of the confidence we continue to place in them."

"Don't be *too* hard on them," said Mrs. Farquhar. "Ned, you had better put the horses in. Rocket is inclined to get excited; but he is such a beautiful leader, I *can't* put another in his place."

"Miss Hammond," said Winter, a few minutes

later, " the sulky is waiting. Will you drive back with me ? I'll guarantee we'll get home first ! "

" I should like to," looking at Mrs. Farquhar. " I wonder if Mr. Macdonald would mind ? "

" Of course not. I'll tell him you've gone on."

Jack got in and took the reins. Mary stepped lightly up, and had barely seated herself before Panic started off.

" I suppose you have often ridden a winner before ? " asked Mary.

" Many a time. I was on a station near Thargomindah, when they had a race meeting lasting two days, and I rode four winners and two seconds."

" Did you really ? "

" Yes ; I rode the winner in the steeplechase and the second in the hurdle-race. If I'd pulled off the double, I should have pocketed five hundred pounds ! "

" What a performance ! My two cousins, Rory and Desmond Blake, who lived in West Australia for some years, used to go in for that sort of thing ; they were quite renowned as amateur riders," Mary said.

" Really ? "

" Yes ; they used to ride at the Picnic Races at Kalgoorlie and Boulder in old days, and at one meeting the two boys carried off six out of the ten events of the day."

"That was good business."

"Wasn't it? Rory had three beautiful ponies—The Maltese Cat, Folly, and Cecilia; the two last won several races. Desmond was the owner of a celebrated pair—Wolfcatcher and Commonwealth—who carried off many prizes. Once, during Race Week, he was laid up with influenza, and a friend actually persuaded him to get up and ride his horse."

"Nonsense! Did he win?"

Mary smiled. "He won it easily, and returned to bed for a week."

"What a plucky chap! They must have been a sporting pair."

"They were also excellent four-in-hand whips, and both played polo regularly. Rory was captain of the Boulder Polo Club, while Desmond was in command of the one at Kalgoorlie. Desmond had rather an amusing experience the year he went home to be married," she continued. "He took his bride to see a polo gymkhana at Hurlingham. There he met Major Hamlyn, an old friend who had once stayed in West Australia, who promptly invited him to ride his pony in the V.C. race.

"'How can I, in these clothes?' he asked.

"'That's easily arranged,' said Major Hamlyn.

"He took him to the pavilion, and soon fitted him out with boots, breeches, etc."

"Splendid!"

"He had to snatch up a 'dummy' dressed as a hospital nurse, at full gallop, place her in front of him, and do one or two other feats; but he accomplished them all, and won the race by three lengths, much to his friend's delight."

"Bravo!" said Jack.

"Tell me some of your adventures out-back," said Mary.

"Well, I put in some queer times at Mingewarra Downs. My experiences with cattle were fairly lively. One mob rushed with me three times in one night, and things got a bit 'thick' at the climax. The 'mountain bull' is a tough customer when his blood is up."

"I know.

> "'When down the rugged tier,
> Dash the wild children of the Waste
> And the steed that mocks at fear.
>
> There's danger in yon hoop-horned dun,
> There's mischief in yon cow;
> Then jump my merry, merry horsemen all,
> The wild mob's bolted now,'"

she quoted.

"I've seen some extraordinary fine bits of tracking in the back blocks," he went on. "You know, in that big country, we muster entirely by looking for the tracks—not the cattle."

"Do you really?"

"Invariably, our average staff would be

two or three white men, with ten or twelve black boys. All of them could track like the deuce; most of them in a way that the average Englishman wouldn't believe if you told him."

"Did you like the life?"

"It was lonely at times," Jack admitted. "I knew of several men being lost in the bush. The first was a brute of a Chinaman, who had been cooking for us. He drew his knife on me once, and got knocked down for it. Of course, he had to go, which, seeing it was Christmas Day, was unfortunate. The trouble was, that I wanted him to cook a few extra cakes and puddings for the men, and he bucked about it. He sailed off on foot, with a tremendous big swag up, at 10 a.m., a blazing hot day. He had about twenty miles to go to hit the river, and the men said 'they hoped the brute would perish.' Eventually, we found that he never reached the river. He got up in the ranges, and must have died there."

"How dreadful! Did you ever find any traces?"

"Yes; his swag, boots, 'billy'—everything except his water-bag—were found, one day when we were mustering, hanging on a three-wire fence that ran up into the hills as a cattle break. As it was known that he had about thirty pounds in notes on him, there used to be great mustering among

the men to 'try and find the Chow.' But they never did."

"What a ghastly story!"

"Another of my experiences was to take up a homestead lease of three thousand acres with Bob Barker, an old schoolfellow. These homestead leases are much the same as free selections. We took up ours on Colinjandra Downs, up on the Bulloo, and worked like niggers. Mr. Mowbray, the owner of the station, rode up one day and, rather to our surprise, asked us to dine with him. He gave us a ripping good dinner, and entertained us right royally. Afterwards, when we were smoking on the verandah, Barker said, 'It's very good of you, sir, to treat us in this hospitable manner—we thought you would look upon us as your natural enemies.'

"'Not at all, my dear fellow!' he replied. 'I've been trying for ten or twelve years to make this place pay on a large scale. If you can show me how to make three thousand acres pay, you'll have shown me how to make my fortune.'"

"And did you?" mischievously.

"Does it look like it?" Jack said. "No; we were starved out of the blessed place—lock, stock, and barrel."

CHAPTER XXXII

"And so you enjoyed yourself?" said Bee. It was the day after Mary's return, and they were talking in the morning-room.

"Yes; I wish we lived on a station again. I'd like to have gone to Buckaminjah; but father says the Burnetts don't keep it up well, and I should hate to see it neglected."

"So should I," Bee declared.

"Have you seen Peter lately?"

"Not since Sunday; he was here to tea."

"May I come in?" and Peter himself looked into the room.

"Why, here he is! We were just talking about you."

"Were you? And how is Mary?" taking her hand and holding it for a moment. "I'm glad you've come safely back, though you seemed to be doing yourself pretty well—what with bolting horses, Picnic Races, and boating on the Warrego."

"We did."

"My blood ran cold when I heard of that horse running you under an overhanging bough. It must have been a narrow escape!"

"Never mind! it's over now."

"What have you done with Lou-Lou?" asked he.

"Lou-Lou has gone for her walk," Bee told him, "so you must be content with us."

Soon after she was called away, and Peter inveigled Mary into the garden. As they walked under the shady pergola, wreathed with trailing roses, Peter told her that he had been suddenly transferred to the *Myrmidon*, on the China station, and was sailing in a week for Hong-Kong. Did she think—*could* she bring herself to let him comfort her for all she had been suffering? If only she would, he asked nothing better than to spend the rest of his life in making her happy.

Mary listened to him quietly, touched by his devotion; but though he exhausted himself in impassioned pleading, she could not bring herself to answer his prayer at once. He wrung from her at last a promise to give him her final decision on the following day, and with this he had to be content.

Still, he felt he had made some slight progress towards winning the prize he longed for. Bee

walked to the gate with him, and, after hearing what had passed, encouraged him to go on hoping.

On the following evening, after being once more besieged by Peter, Mary at last consented to allow him to devote himself to the task of making her happy, with the full consent of her parents.

The engagement was to be given out at once, and, if things were propitious when he reached Hong-Kong, after arrangements had been made about a house, etc., her father would take Mary out there in six months' time.

"GRAND HOTEL, AGRA, *December* 5.

"MY DEAR DICK,—Isabel and I were married last week, and we are spending a few days here as Mrs. Charles Wharton has always wished to see the Taj Mahal. Of course, we are as happy as two birds on a bough! We have seen Arjamand's beautiful resting-place by moonlight and sunlight and starlight, and it is still to us the 'dream imprisoned in marble.' We talk of going on to Delhi, and perhaps to Jaipur and Udaipur, then hey for Old England! as my governor wants to see us. He gave me a big cheque, so I suppose we shall stay there while the money lasts. But it won't be long before you see us back. How are you feeling yourself? I suppose you are spending most of your time on

the look out for bush fires! Have you seen anything of the Elliotts lately? Give my love to Bob, and tell him our news.

"Do you know, I've been thinking of you often, and, happy as I am, it makes me sad to think of you grinding away at Collaroi, spending lonely evenings by yourself.

"Seriously, if I were you, I should put my pride in my pocket and go to see Miss Hammond. Ask her to forgive you and take you back. She is one of the best, and it is a pity to let what is past stand in the way of future happiness. I would give anything to see you as happy as we are. Isabel wishes to be very kindly remembered to you, and I am, yours ever,

"CHARLES WHARTON."

Dick found this letter waiting for him when he got home one hot day, after an exciting battle with a bush fire—fortunately discovered in time to beat it out with branches, aided by an army of station hands. After a bath and change of clothes, he felt somewhat refreshed, and sat down to his dinner. Opening Charley's letter, he spread it out in front of him and began to peruse its contents. After going through it carefully, he relapsed into a brown study, then read the last part again.

"I believe I'll take Charley's advice," he thought. "Is it possible that Mary would

listen to me after what is past? Oh! if she *only* would!"

He sat down to indite a letter to her. After several attempts, he at last succeeded in expressing himself to his satisfaction, and, putting it into an envelope, addressed it.

Then he filled his pipe and began to read the *Sydney Morning Herald*. He went carefully through the cables, the leading article, the sporting intelligence, the infuriated letters on the Land Tax—till a paragraph in the social column caught his eye. It ran thus: "A marriage is arranged, and will shortly take place, between John Marcus Dalrymple, H.M.S. *Myrmidon*, and Mary, younger daughter of Charles Hammond, of Goorialda Downs, and Mount Augusta, Darling Point, Sydney."

He stared dumbly at the paragraph, stunned by this paralysing blow. "Too late! If I had only known, I might have been in time."

He got up, and, taking the letter he had just written, tore it across and dropped the pieces into the waste-paper basket.

CHAPTER XXXIII

"COME in, Dolly; I've got some news," said Mrs. Egerton.

"Really?"

"You look tired."

"Akbar nearly pulled my arms out. But tell me the news?"

"Mr. Heathcote has written——"

"What! The grass-widower we knew at Belgaum?"

"Yes; he has been moved to Waltair, and he wants you and me, Geoffrey and Jack, to go for a shooting picnic to the Bhilka Lakes at Muttagoda. Jack's leave isn't up till Friday, so he can fit it in."

"What time do we start?"

"Punctually at 10 a.m."

Suddenly Geoffrey walked in. "What's happening now?" he demanded.

Mildred unfolded Mr. Heathcote's invitation.

"That's a corking idea! Those Lakes are swarming with ducks and green pigeons. Dolly,

you must have made an impression on him during that Race Week ! "

" Don't be a goose ! "

" He is a desperate flirt ! "

" If you go on like this, Dolly will refuse to go."

Exactly at ten the sisters stood on the platform with Jack, waiting for the Waltair train.

" Geoffrey is late ! " Mildred declared. " Surely parade must be over ! "

The little railway station gleamed brightly in the morning sun. A long line of khaki-clad " Tommies " marched past on their way back to barracks. The colonel halted at the gate, and, giving his charger to the syce, joined the group on the platform.

" I'm tremendously sorry," he announced, " but I'm afraid I can't get away ! "

" *Oh, Geoffrey !* " Mildred exclaimed.

" Well, the truth is, there is serious dissatisfaction about the men's rations. The sergeant has been culpably careless—there are several complaints, which I shall have to look into. It's intensely irritating, and I'm most annoyed at being done out of the picnic. Jack, I leave them both in your care ! "

" I'll look after them, Colonel ! "

" How disappointing ! " the sisters chorused.

The train came in slowly; a tall man got out and came up to them.

"This is very good of you, Mrs. Egerton," he said. "By a strenuous effort I got through my office work in time—and here I am! The Rajah of Muttagoda has placed his bungalow at my disposal, so you will be quite comfortable."

"How good of you to take all this trouble!"

"Not at all. I can promise you good shooting. How are you, Mrs. Vane? I'm delighted to see you again. Have you had any shikar lately?"

"Not since she shot a teal on the wing," Geoffrey said. "It was a fluke, of course, and I'm always assuring her that she'll never break *that* record!"

"Never mind, you'll have a chance to distinguish yourself to-morrow."

The colonel said good-bye, and, mounting his horse, rode back to attend orderly-room. The train moved slowly out.

"By Gad, Heathcote, you do yourself well!" Jack remarked.

"Yes. I often feel lonely going up and down the line in this big carriage by myself—but on these occasions it's top-hole, isn't it?"

. . . . . .

"What do you think of Muttagoda?" asked Mildred, as they rested after tiffin in the principal bedroom of the Rajah's bungalow.

"Quite charming!"

"The Rajah is sending his carriage to take us for a drive across the hills."

"I think I'll get up now."

"Suppose we do; the men will be here directly."

"I hope this place meets with your approval?" Heathcote asked, following Jack to the verandah, where Dolly was making tea.

"It does, indeed."

"Ah, you don't know this side of India yet!"

"Here's the Rajah's carriage already," said Mildred, as the big landau rolled slowly up, drawn by two fine Walers.

The syce got down to open the door, waving a horsehair chowry to keep off the flies.

Away they drove through avenues of banyan trees, the red fruit gleaming among their leaves. Grey monkeys peered at them from the branches, where they sat swinging and chattering, while tiny squirrels ran up and down the trunks.

Then on, through dusky groves of fluttering bamboos, along the sides of jungle-clad hills, till they reached the steep incline of the peak, rising out of Muttagoda Forest.

Mr. Heathcote ordered a halt, and they got out.

"I want you to see my favourite view, Mrs. Egerton," leading the way to the summit.

" Ripping, isn't it ? " said Jack.

" It is, indeed," echoed Mildred, gazing at the green paddy-fields below at their feet, the ryots driving buffaloes in a rude plough, and the still, blue waters of the lakes.

India's brief twilight was fast approaching. Great purple shadows rested in the ghauts ; the bamboos rustled in the breeze. Mr. Heathcote turned to Dolly, who looked silently at the entrancing scene.

" Does it come up to your expectations ? "

" Adjectives are useless ! " she replied. " D'you think I'd ever grow tired of it ? "

" It depends on your sense of beauty ! "

. . . . . .

" Khana bringing, mem sahib," announced the ayah. She hooked up Dolly's white dress, then left her to attend to Mildred.

" You'd better go, dear," said the latter.

Mr. Heathcote was waiting on the verandah. " You won't mind dining out of doors ? "

" I should enjoy it."

" I thought so, so I told Abdul to lay the table on the end of the platform."

" Delightful ! "

" I apologise for being late," said Mildred.

The kitmutgar announced dinner, and they walked to the yellow-sanded platform, meeting

Jack on the way. A richly chased lamp occupied the centre of the table among Abdul's decorations of croton leaves. The three white-robed attendants waited noiselessly. The shining waters of the lakes gleamed silver in the moonlight. From the village came the muffled sound of tom-toms, while farther away loomed the dark red towers of the Rajah's palace.

Every one was in the gayest spirits. Mildred and Jack teased each other as usual, and Mr. Heathcote told them thrilling stories of his adventures.

"Jack, I feel I must have some exercise," declared Mrs. Egerton, as they left the table. "Let us stroll up and down, while you and Mr. Heathcote smoke."

"Do you like walking, Mrs. Vane?" inquired their host, lighting a cheroot.

"Yes, occasionally."

"Very well, let us have chota hazri on the verandah, and I'll take you to see some of the surrounding scenery."

"That will be charming!"

"My dear, what energy!" Mildred said. "I shall make Jack take me for a short stroll a little later."

. . . . . .

"Shall we start?" said Mr. Heathcote.

In another moment they were walking towards a long vista of banyan trees. "This is the far-famed 'Grand Trunk Road,'" he explained. "It runs almost in a straight line from Madras to Calcutta! Those mounds of masonry are the graves of soldiers who died on the march in the days of Clive."

"Really? What monuments of the past!"

As they walked along the red road between the banyan trees, monkeys hung chattering from the boughs. Suddenly they came upon a group of natives, among whom stood an "old man" monkey.

It looked as if they were all talking together, till the pedestrians arrived, when the monkey retreated up the nearest tree.

Then he led her through jungle and bamboo groves, emerging on native villages, their quaint mud huts hidden in mango topes.

"What are we doing to-day?" Dolly asked.

"First, after tea, the carriage comes to take us to call on the Rajah——"

"Quite a good idea!"

"Then we go out on the lake for a little duck-shooting; later on, after walking up the hill, we reach the railway line, where two trollies will be waiting. On these we shall run home to dinner, taking any game we may find on the way."

" What sort of trollies ? "

" Railway trollies. These are like iron sofas, with plenty of cushions, mounted on a small platform. Each has six coolies, who run behind, three on each side. We shall fly along at racing speed."

" How exciting ! "

As she spoke, they came to a small ravine full of water.

" It means getting across this," Heathcote said, " or we must walk half a mile to get round it. I think you had better let me carry you over ? "

" Oh, I couldn't *possibly*." (" It wouldn't be fair to his wife," she thought ; besides, he might drop her.)

Mr. Heathcote spent ten minutes trying to persuade her, but in vain. Accordingly, they walked round the long way.

. . . . . .

" I am very glad to see you," the Rajah declared, as Mildred and Dolly were presented to him. He showed them the white marble slabs imported from Italy to build a new pleasure-house in the garden, turned on the orchestrion, and exhibited his last new toy—a magnificent camera.

Flattered by Dolly's interest, he presented

her with several photographs of forest scenery, taken by himself. These he inscribed with her name, signing his own string of patronymics at the bottom, then added a commonplace stamp, with RAJAH OF MUTTAGODA in pink letters.

Mrs. Egerton asked if they might see the Ranee and her infant, but was informed that "she had a bad cold, and the baby was asleep," so the idea was abandoned.

The Rajah, a short man of generous outline, was dressed in European clothes of dark blue flannel. A gorgeous smoking-cap adorned his head. The palace was furnished in the early Victorian manner, with gilt-framed mirrors, ormolu clocks, chiffoniers with marble tops, and a variety of musical boxes. Natives crouched behind cabinet, screen, and pillar, listening to every word. As they took leave, the Rajah invited them to use his boat, but Heathcote courteously declined, saying he wished to show Mrs. Vane the native boats propelled with long bamboo poles.

"But there's no pier!" Dolly exclaimed.

Just then the boatmen advanced, and, making a sedan-chair of their crossed arms, carried the sisters out through the shallow water, followed by the men.

As the boat pushed off, Mr. Heathcote said,

"Tell me, Mrs. Vane—is the Mohammedan method preferable to mine?"

Dolly blushed while he related the story of the morning's adventure, on which Mildred and Jack chaffed her cruelly. The lakes were more beautiful than ever. On an island in the centre a ruined tower loomed, isolated among plantain groves.

"That tower," Heathcote explained, "is where the late Rajah imprisoned his wives when they offended him."

"The old tyrant!"

"Perhaps—but discipline must be maintained in the zenana."

Ducks and green pigeons rose in clouds as they approached the far borders of the lake. The men shot dozens of birds, till the boat was half filled with their spoils. Mildred got a couple of pigeons, but Dolly's luck was out—she missed every shot. Suddenly the dusk descended, throwing purple shadows on forest, tree, and hill. A great golden moon rose slowly as they reached the shore, and set out to walk to the trollies.

"I *must* have another shot at something," Mildred declared to Jack.

"You're not angry with me, are you?" asked Heathcote, helping Dolly over the rocks.

"Yes, I am. They will never let me hear the end of it. Besides——"

"Yes?"

"Besides, you might have dropped me——"

He laughed. "Oh, I *never* should have dropped you! By the way, were those mangoes the right kind?"

"Yes, absolutely delicious. But why did you take the trouble to send them so far?"

He looked at her. "Can't you understand?" he said gently. Dolly's head was in a whirl. This was dreadful!

Mrs. Egerton was seated on the foremost trolly, while Jack stood smoking a cheroot. "Hurry up, you two," he called. "We are suffering the pangs of hunger."

Heathcote got up beside Mildred, and the coolies set off down the line.

Jack helped Dolly into her seat, and they were whirled along after the others. The fire-flies glistened among the palm-fronds as they rushed swiftly through the moonlight.

"India is a lovely country! I should never grow tired of it," Dolly said.

"I wouldn't live here always for the world." he responded. "It's a pleasant place for a time, but there are drawbacks."

"Such as——?"

"Such as the breaking up of families. As you know, children can't live here."

"I know; it's dreadful for their poor parents."

"Dreadful, indeed. It's a wretched existence for any man doomed to be parted indefinitely from either wife or children."

"Horrible! One wonders why people get married—if they are to live at different ends of the world."

"I've often thought that myself. Still, after all—Dolly—don't you think——"

There was a loud crash, everything grew dark, and Mrs. Vane knew no more.

. . . . . .

"Where am I?" Dolly asked, when she opened her eyes, to find herself lying on the grass.

Jack bent over her tenderly, bathing her forehead with a handkerchief dipped in water. "You are here, quite safe. Thank God! you are alive, child. For one awful moment I thought you were dead. The trolly ran off the line—the points were open. By some negligence the man forgot to lock them after the 6.15 train ran through. Poor Muhammid Din made desperate attempts to save us, and has hurt his leg badly. Dolly—darling—*darling*—can you ever forgive me? You might have been killed—and what should I have done then?"

She looked up into his face. "Would you *really* have cared?"

"Cared?—*Cared?*" He took her in his arms and held her close. "Surely you must know by this time how I love you—you are the only woman in the world to me."

"But, I thought you and Mrs. Fanshawe were such friends? You rode with her nearly every morning."

"I know—only to tease you."

"Have you forgiven me about—not telling you of——"

Jack stopped her mouth with a kiss. "Don't put it into words, darling. I forgave you long ago. I've loved you ever since that Polo match, when we first met. Do you believe me now—sweetheart?"

. . . . . .

"Will you kindly explain?" demanded Mildred. Her sister had refused to appear at dinner, but was practically uninjured, save for a few bruises.

"Everything is all right again," said Dolly, with shining eyes. "Jack says he can't be happy without me—in spite of my sins, so we are engaged again. Also (though I don't know if I can keep it!) I've promised him that I will *never* flirt again."

CHAPTER XXXIV

"THIS is like old times, Dick!" said Charley Wharton, who, with his wife and Dick, was breakfasting at the Australia Hotel. The Whartons had just landed from England *via* Vancouver, and Dick's yearly holiday being due, they arranged to meet in Sydney.

"Isn't it! Except that there is now a third member of the party."

"You don't mind, do you?" Isabel asked playfully.

"On the contrary, I'm delighted to see you. I suppose you both enjoyed your trip home?"

"We had a top-hole time," Charley declared. "The governor fell in love with her at sight."

"I knew he would!"

"Now, Charley, stop being personal. What are you doing this morning?"

"I've got a little business——"

"So have I," Dick averred.

"I must write some letters," said Isabel.

"Very well," Charley said. "I shan't be long, dear."

The two men walked a short distance together, when Dick repaired to see his tailor. After spending some time over patterns of tweed, he left the shop, and turned his steps towards Macquarie Street, intending to go for a stroll in the Botanical Gardens.

On the way he met an old squatter, named Wilson, whom he had often met at Mount Augusta. After conversing for a few moments, he inquired after the Hammond family.

"Haven't you heard?" the old gentleman asked gravely. "They are in great trouble."

"Indeed! What has happened, sir?" Dick inquired.

"They had a cable yesterday to say that Mr. Dalrymple is dead."

"Great Heaven!" Dick exclaimed, much shocked. "How dreadful!"

"Dreadful, indeed. The poor fellow had a bad fall, jumping a fence in a paper-chase. His horse rolled on him, and his spine was badly injured. He only lived a few hours."

. . . . . .

A year has rolled by since poor Peter's sad end. The grass on his grave has been green for

many months. April is here, and Dick is once more in Sydney. At this moment he is entering the gates of Mount Augusta.

. . . . . .

"Mary," said Dick, when the door shut finally behind Mrs. Hammond. "Mary, can you ever forgive me?"

She turned her head silently, their eyes met —the next moment she was in his arms, crying quietly, with her head on his shoulder.

"I've been an awful brute, darling. Put your arms round my neck, or I can't tell you."

"You mean about the little widow," said Mary. "Never mind—it's all over now—I forgave you long ago." Her voice faltered.

Dick held her close to his heart. "You darling," he said remorsefully. "I wasn't worthy of your love and trust. I *did* flirt with her abominably. I suppose it was blind infatuation. She was a fascinating minx, but she wasn't fit to wipe your shoes, my sweetheart."

"Don't tell me any more. I—I—don't want *ever* to hear another word about it."

Dick kissed her again. "My own girl, is it really true that I have got you back?"

Mary stroked his hair tenderly. "You silly old boy. You belong to me, and I belong to you, for ever and ever!"

"What a dear you are! I don't know what you see in me. What makes you love me so much, sweetheart?"

But Mary put her arms round his neck, and laid her soft cheek against his. "I love you because you're Dick," she said.

THE END

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